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J

HULSEAN LECTURES

FOR 1822.

On SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

ON
SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

TWENTY DISCOURSES

PREACHED BEFORE
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

IN THE YEAR 1822,

AT

The Lecture

FOUNDED BY THE REV. JOHN HULSE, M.A.

By C. BENSON, M.A.

FELLOW OF MAGDALENE COLLEGE, AND VICAR OF LEDSHAM,
YORKSHIRE.

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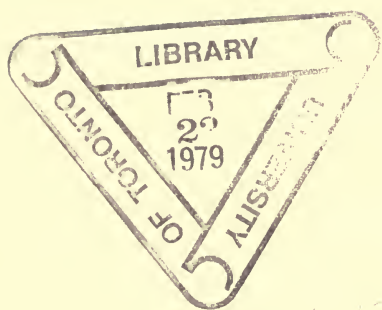
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TO
GRANVILLE HASTINGS WHEELER,
OF
OTTERDEN PLACE
IN THE COUNTY OF KENT,
AND
LEDSTONE HALL
IN THE COUNTY OF YORK,
ESQUIRE.

Dear Sir,

THE manner in which you have had the goodness to present me to the Vicarage I now hold, though unconnected and a stranger to you but by name; the disinterestedness of the motives by which you were influenced, and the liberality and amount of those great pecuniary and other sacrifices, which you have voluntarily made for the benefit of all future Incumbents, demand from me a public acknowledgement, both on my own account, and that

of the Established Church. That I may be enabled to fulfil your wishes for the good of those useful and benevolent Institutions, which the piety of Lady Elizabeth Hastings (whose possessions you inherit,) so wisely established and largely endowed, will be my endeavour, as it is my prayer.

I remain,

with sentiments of

gratitude and respect,

your faithful and obliged

friend and servant,

C. BENSON.

PREFACE.




THE following Course of Lectures is divided into two Parts. The first treats of Scripture Difficulties in general: the second, of those of the Book of Genesis in particular. Had I continued to hold the situation which produced these Discourses, it was my intention to have proceeded to the consideration of similar Difficulties in the succeeding Books of the Old and New Testaments: and should the present attempt be favourably received, it

will still be my endeavour, amidst other avocations, to continue the plan. The subject of each particular Lecture will be found in the table of Contents, and renders any further observations unnecessary. I cannot, however, close these remarks without returning my thanks to the Trustees, by whom I have, on two distinct occasions, been placed in the situation of Hulsean Lecturer. My acknowledgements are particularly due to the Hon. and Rev. **GEORGE NEVILLE, M.A.** Master of Magdalene College, for having nominated me to the office unsolicited, and at a time when I was personally unknown to him, as well as for many subsequent favours;—and to the Rev. Dr. **FRENCH**, late Vice-Chancellor, and the Masters of Trinity and St. John's Colleges, for the uniform

kindness I have experienced at their hands, in affording me those accommodations which health or other circumstances required.

Ledsham, Dec. 21, 1822.





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Substance of certain CLAUSES in the WILL
of the REV. J. HULSE, M.A. dated July 21,
1777.

He founds a LECTURESHIP in the University of Cambridge.

The *Lecturer* is to be a "Clergyman in the University of Cambridge, of the degree of Master of Arts, and under the age of forty years." He is to be *elected annually*, "on Christmas-day, or within seven days after, by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, and by the Master of Trinity College, and the Master of Saint John's College, or any two of them." In case the Master of Trinity, or the Master of Saint John's be the Vice-Chancellor, the Greek Professor is to be the third Trustee.

The *duty* of the said Lecturer is "to preach twenty Sermons in the whole year, that is to say, ten Sermons during the months of April, and May, and the two first weeks in June; and likewise ten Sermons during the months of September, and October, and during the two first weeks in November."

The *place* of preaching, is to be "Saint Mary's Great Church in Cambridge;" and the *time*, "either on the Friday morning, or else on Sunday afternoon."

The *subject* of the said Discourses is to be, "the Evidence for Revealed Religion; the truth and excellence of Christianity; Prophecies and Miracles; direct or collateral proofs of the Christian religion, especially the collateral arguments; the more difficult texts or obscure parts of the Holy Scriptures;" or any one or more of these topics, at the discretion of the Preacher. The subject of the said Discourses is *not* to be "any particular sects or controversies amongst Christians themselves; except some

new and dangerous error, either of superstition, or enthusiasm, as of Popery or Methodism, or the like, either in opinion or practice, shall prevail. And in all the said twenty Sermons, such practical observations shall be made, and such useful conclusions added, as may best instruct and edify mankind."

"The said twenty Sermons are to be every year printed," at the Preacher's expence, "and a new Preacher elected, (except in the case of the extraordinary merit of the Preacher, when it may sometimes be thought proper to continue the same person for five or, at the most, for six years together, but for no longer term) nor shall he ever afterwards be again elected to the same duty."



"AN ABSTRACT of the heads or material parts" of the WILL of the Rev. JOHN HULSE, relative to the *two Scholarships*, founded by him in St. John's College, and by him directed to be added to the conclusion of the foregoing clauses, "so that such Clergyman, or persons, whom the same may concern, may know that there are such endowments, of which they may claim and take the benefit, under the regulations, and with the qualifications, therein mentioned."

The Scholars are to be "Undergraduates of St. John's College, who shall be born in the county palatine of Chester." "Such Scholar is to be elected by the Master and a majority of the senior Fellows of the said College on Christmas-day, or in the first seven days after," and candidates are to have the preference, in the order, and with the limitations specified in the following extracts.

1. "The son of any Clergyman, who shall at any time officiate as Curate to the Vicar of Sandbach; or next to him the son of any Vicar or Curate, who shall then live and officiate in the parish of Middlewich, as the proper Minister or Curate of Middlewich; or lastly of any Minister or Curate of the Chapel of Witton, or who shall reside and live in the town of Northwich or Witton, or the adjacent townships of Castle Northwich and Winnington, and shall do the duty of the said Chapel as the proper Minister of Witton (all of them in the said county of Chester.)"

2. "And in default of such persons, then the son of any other Clergyman, who (that is which son) shall be born in either of the said parishes of Sandbach or Middlewich, or in the said Chapelry of Middlewich, shall have the preference. And if none shall be admitted, then the son of any other Clergyman shall be preferred, who (that is which son) shall be born in the said county of Chester, and next in any of the four following counties of Stafford, Salop, Derby, or Lancaster; or lastly, elsewhere in any other county or part of England, provided that it shall appear that the Clergyman who is father to such Scholar is not, if living, or, if dead, was not at the time of his death possessed of any spiritual preferment of more than one hundred and forty pounds a year, clear income; or whose income in every respect shall not exceed the clear yearly value of two hundred pounds in the whole."

"But if no son of any Clergyman, so entitled as aforesaid, shall be elected into such Scholarship, the same shall be given to the son of some lay person, whose clear yearly income does not, if living, and, if dead, did not at the time of his death amount to more than two hundred pounds; and such son being born in the counties of Chester, Stafford, Salop, Derby, and Lancaster, the counties in that order having a preference; or lastly, elsewhere in England."

“ And such Scholar, whether the son of a Clergyman, or Layman, to be elected in manner aforesaid, shall continue to enjoy this my benefaction until he shall take, or be of standing to take his first degree of Bachelor of Arts, unless some other person, being the son of some of the officiating ministers at some of the Churches or Chapels before mentioned, and otherwise qualified as aforesaid, and which qualification, had he been a member of the said College at the time the party in possession of the Scholarship had been elected, would have been entitled to the preference, shall be admitted a member of the said College; in which case the Scholar, who shall then be in possession, shall only hold the same for that year; and the other, with a prior right, shall be elected to the same the year following. And I do appoint the Master and senior Fellows of St. John's College Trustees for the said Scholarships.”



HULSEAN LECTURES

FOR 1822.

LECTURE I.

ORIGIN OF SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

2 PET. III. 16.

“ In which are some things hard to be understood.”

THE Scriptures profess to have been “given by inspiration,” and to have been “written for our learning^a ;” and yet they have been so given and so written that the very wisest and most intellectual of men cannot but feel, that the general clearness of what they teach is obscured and encumbered, in many instances, by “things hard to be understood.” But not only are the readers of Revelation distressed by the existence ; they are harassed also by objections deduced from the very nature of the difficulties which

^a Rom. xv. 4.

occur. It is in vain for the Apostle of the Gentiles to declare that “all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness^a.” The unbeliever rejects his authority and denies the fact. He maintains that a variety of passages in the Bible are so abstruse as to be altogether unintelligible, and, of course, profitless; whilst others are, in his opinion, both immoral and irrational:—immoral, because repugnant to the fundamental principles of his moral philosophy; and irrational, because irreconcilable with the ordinary processes of his logical reasoning. These are serious accusations. It becomes a matter of considerable importance, therefore, to examine, first, whence these difficulties in the Jewish and Christian Revelations arise^b, and secondly, whether their existence, their nature, and their extent, be consistent with the character of the Scriptures as an inspired, and their object as a religiously instructive work^c.

With regard to the origin of Scripture difficulties, it is evident, that such is the manner and such the circumstances under which we believe the Bible to have been composed, that, if we

^a 2 Tim. iii. 16.

^b The subject of the present Lecture.

^c See Lectures 2d, 3d, and 4th.

take its genuineness and authenticity for granted, and suppose it to be nothing more than a mere human production, it is quite impossible but that difficulties of various kinds must be found to exist in it. If the several Books of the canonical Scriptures be attributed to their proper authors ; if they were written in the different ages and countries to which they are generally ascribed ; if they were composed in the languages in which they now exist ; and if they contain a faithful representation of the transactions to which they refer, it would have been most unnatural had there not, in a period so remote from their origin as the present, been numerous passages which were quite unintelligible to the majority of readers, and dark even to the most profoundly erudite.

1. The first cause of these Scripture difficulties is to be found in the remote, yet various persons, and periods, and countries, in which and by whom the Bible was composed.

The mutability of sublunary things extends itself even to the minds of men ; and there is not a greater fluctuation in the orders of architecture and modes of dress in different ages, than in their forms of expression and habits of thought. Not only do words themselves suffer a change of meaning, but their combinations also are

altered. Phrases which at one time were clear and distinct, appear at another indefinite and obscure. Expressions which were once metaphorical become literal; and metaphors, whose use was once so frequent and determinate that custom had assigned to them a signification almost literal, grow, at length, so antiquated and obsolete, that the abstract conceptions of a less poetical age are apt to condemn them as unintelligible and absurd, or to interpret them in a sense which sometimes misrepresents, and generally exceeds, their real import. Thus length of years often destroys intellectual as completely as it does personal beauty, and so thoroughly changes the character of a composition, that it is not till after the strictest scrutiny that we are enabled to conceive what those who formerly looked upon it could admire.

Not only however has each age, but each country and each individual a distinct and appropriate train of images, expressions and thoughts. The invigorating mildness of a temperate zone, and the enervating heats and luxurious vegetation of a southern clime, generate ideas and representations of happiness and misery altogether dissimilar from those which prevail amongst the frozen inhabitants of the dark and dreary north: and the figures of speech are, of course, regu-

lated by the pictures of the imagination. This effect is still heightened by peculiarities in the natural formation of each man's mind; so that where, as in the Bible, we meet with a work of great, though different degrees of antiquity, composed by several individuals and in different countries, not one of which has any strong resemblance to that in which we ourselves reside, obscurity, in no inconsiderable number of places, must be the necessary result. The writers must often appear inexplicable to our present notions, and sometimes irreconcilable with each other; because adopting the same words in a different sense, or expressing the same thoughts in phraseology of a dissimilar character.

2. We may discover a second cause of "things hard to be understood," in the *medium* which has been selected for the vehicle of revelation. The sacred Volume may be divided into the Old and New Testaments, not more by the different nature of the dispensations those covenants contain, than by the different languages in which they are written. The Law and the Prophets speak to us in the Hebrew tongue. The Gospel has brought life and immortality to light through the more polished periods of the Greek. Both languages, however, have long ceased to be spoken with purity by any people, and the grammatical

principles of both are distinct, in many essential points, from that construction and those forms of speech which are prevalent in modern ages, and in our native land. In searching out the meaning of the Scriptures, we have, therefore, to contend with the difficulties of two languages, both dead and disused, both different from each other, and both distinct from our own. Were there many other compositions of the same kind, or in the same languages, as the Bible in our possession, the obstacles arising from these circumstances would not perhaps have been found very formidable in reality, however alarming in their apparent magnitude. Had we the power of comparing the words and phrases whose meaning is dubious in the pages of revelation, with the more intelligible use of them in other and profane authors, the labour and literature of successive expositors would no doubt, in most cases, have long ago issued in a definite and true interpretation. But the Hebrew idioms are very often incapable of receiving illustration from analogous compositions, because the language of the Hebrew Scriptures is not to be found, under precisely the same modification, in any other writings; whilst its vocabulary is so scanty, and its grammatical rules of such a nature, as to give rise to considerable ambiguity. Nor is this source of doubt confined to the Hebrew Scriptures or

the Mosaic covenant. It extends its influence also over the translation of those records into Greek, and over the pages of the Christian dispensation. For the phraseology of both the Septuagint and the Gospel, from having been written by Jews, has been moulded, in some measure, into a Jewish form, though written in Grecian words, and has thus frequently combined the peculiarities of both languages. Hence it is not unusual to meet with an expression which, in one place, is adopted in a classical, whilst in another it seems to bear an Hellenistical sense. Of course it must sometimes be difficult to determine in which of the two senses it ought really to be interpreted.

3. That obscurity which springs from our ignorance of the precise idea it was the intention of an Author to convey, by the use of certain words and phrases in a foreign language, is considerably diminished in most cases, if we are acquainted with the manners and customs of the age in which he lived, and the political and religious system to which he was subject. We are then able, as it were, to place ourselves in the very situation in which he stood, to appreciate his feelings, understand his allusions, and enter into the principles of his reasoning. Hence, though his composition be intricate and his phra-

seology vague or abstruse, we are generally able to perceive the drift of his statements, and, by the aid of our own conjectures upon his probable intention, to ascertain the real meaning of his writings. But both the Ecclesiastical Polity of the Jews, and the Civil Polity of the Romans, under which the most important portions of the sacred Volume were produced, have long since ceased to exist; and the scanty, indistinct, and sometimes perhaps, even erroneous notions we entertain of their institutions, their forms of government and domestic arrangements, are to be gathered from the lucubrations of Antiquaries, whose works would require a life to read and more than a life to estimate. Nor is this the only, or the greatest disadvantage of this kind which we experience in our interpretation of the Bible. Could we even remove every doubt which rests upon the subject of the Jewish and Roman Antiquities, there would still remain a large field of research where no diligence or learning would be of any material use. For the more ancient books of Holy Writ refer to people and periods concerning whose manners and religion we can derive no assistance whatever from contemporary sources. I do not merely allude to those brief annals of the antediluvian ages which the Bible contains, and which are confessedly the only authentic account we possess of a most important

portion of the history of the world. I call to mind the Egyptians also, as a people concerning whom we can glean but little information from existing authors. There still rests upon their land a "darkness which may be felt^a," precluding us from that knowledge of Egyptian antiquities and events, which would tend, if in our possession, to throw more light upon various enactments in the Mosaic Covenant, and various occurrences in the Jewish History, than any other species of information to which we could be introduced.

4. To the distance and obscurity of the periods and people to which so many portions of the Bible refer, we may add the variety and extent of the subjects it embraces. Were one age or one nation alone concerned in the transactions which the sacred writings detail, it would have been comparatively easy to investigate every connected topic. But, instead of this, we find them relating the occurrences of every age and almost every people, which has formed a conspicuous feature in the fluctuations of political society and religious opinions since the world began. We ought, therefore, to be intimately acquainted with the whole series of Civil and Ecclesiastical

^a Exod. x. 21.

History to comprehend with clearness the entire range of their contents : a task both too laborious and too difficult for the years and talents of the most powerful mind.

5. But it is not merely as historical documents that the Scriptures are to be contemplated. They profess to be prophetic of the future as well as descriptive of the past. A new source of difficulty is thus presented to our view, and of the most formidable nature. The general object of predictions is not so much to inform the mind with certainty of what is to come, as to excite its attention by partial discovery, and to speak in a language possessing such mingled gleams of light and shades of darkness, as may at once enable us to conjecture when and where we should look for the fulfilment of a predicted event, and give us a sufficient assurance, upon reflection, that the fulfilment was foreseen. Every prophecy is not, indeed, framed with this express and only view. There are various imaginable motives for which fore-knowledge may be communicated to man, and man be authorised to declare what he foresees ; but, undoubtedly, one of the most common ends for which predictions are uttered is, that when the things spoken of come to pass, we may remember and believe that they were spoken of. To effect this purpose, a

figurative language, capable of the requisite degree of precision and ambiguity, has been uniformly adopted by the Prophets; either framed by the force of their own natural genius; or arising out of accidental circumstances; or suggested by the immediate inspiration of God. To interpret such a language, whatever be its source, must, of course, always be a matter of considerable nicety, and demand such a happy union of imagination and judgement in the individual employed upon its illustration, as is seldom to be found even among critics of the highest eminence.

6. Another character under which the sacred Volume appears, is that of a scheme for the redemption of our fallen nature, and a repository of religious doctrines and of moral precepts for our acceptance and use. With this object in view, the Scriptures, beginning with the formation and innocency of man, proceed next to his loss of holiness and immortality in the fall; and whilst in justice they pronounce the judgement of death upon his crime, in mercy give a promise of some future mitigation of the woe. In the gradual developement of that promise all the subsequent pages of the Bible are in a greater or less degree employed; and all the works of God's power, and all the words of his will, are

to be considered as essential and component parts in the glorious system of the Redeemer's love,—a system which though it has been constantly progressive, is still incomplete, and will receive its full and final accomplishment only in another and eternal world. Who then shall presume to say that he is able to appreciate the whole of this mighty plan, to pursue it in detail, or to tell how each event, or individual who has played his part in the great drama of life, has been made subservient to the general result? Such knowledge is too excellent for man. A scheme so diversified and enlarged is above the comprehension of any human intellect. The book, therefore, which is principally, if not entirely, conversant about this scheme, must often puzzle the reasoning of a finite being, and leaving many things but slightly noticed or imperfectly explained, give rise to a variety of conjectures and some serious difficulties, which demand the exercise of faith rather than of ingenuity.

But if the system itself be thus difficult to estimate and explain in all its parts, the consequences which flow from it, the precepts and doctrines for which it is both a reason and a foundation, cannot be less liable to abound in “things hard to be understood.” It has been found a task too arduous for the Moral Philosopher to

trace, without error, even those duties and opinions which are implied only by the ordinary relation in which men stand towards their Creator and fellow-creatures, as children of one common parent, and partakers of the same feelings and prospects and powers. Much more then must the way in which man is to think and act, now that he has lost the image of his Maker, and changed the relation of a Son into that of a sinner, be pregnant with difficulty and doubt. The complexity of this new and melancholy state of the case, and the various modes in which we are called upon to co-operate with God in the divine object of recalling and reconciling the world unto himself, cannot but be still oftener inexplicable upon the mere principles of human science. We shall often, in contemplating the "great mystery of godliness^a," be at a loss to perceive the connection between the means and the end of our redemption, and be incapable, in many instances, of estimating their precise nature and operation. In a word, since the Bible is a work which treats familiarly and freely of a multiplicity of truths belonging to the most intricate branches of Ethical and Metaphysical science, it would be in vain to hope that we should not be baffled by the frequent occurrence of obscurity.

^a 1 Tim. iii. 16.

7. Of the Scriptures it may be remarked, as a still farther source of difficulty, that they relate to changes in the physical as well as the moral world. They record the creation and the deluge, and they anticipate the destruction of the whole material Universe, and more especially of that globe which we inherit as the sons of Adam, referring it apparently to the operation of fire. They speak also with confidence of the dissolution of man's fleshly tabernacle ; not, however, as an eternal reduction of it to its primary and unthinking elements, but merely as a preparatory step to its resurrection in a more glorious and permanent form. To compare then the present appearances of nature with these accounts, and observe how they confirm or confute each other, together with the extent and darkness of the subjects themselves, must necessarily open a wide field for science to exercise her powers in the solution of the questions which arise ; and must very often also compel her to acknowledge how ineffectual are her best efforts to give any satisfactory answer to her inquiries.

8. The last source of difficulty to which I shall allude, is the fact that the Scriptures are not confined to the limits of earth, and the concerns of its inhabitants as the matter of their statements ; but wing their way to the remotest

regions of space, and pass through all the ranks of spiritual and intellectual being, through Angels and Archangels up to God. The ministrations of these holy spirits that are about the throne of the Eternal; the fall, and fate, and evil workings of that miserable company, whose leader is Satan, whose end is destruction and whose pride is their god; the malice and the snares of that Prince of the Power of the Air, who is at once both the tempter and the accuser of the brethren; the operations of the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, in the conversion and sanctification of the soul; the great mysteries of the creation and redemption of man, of the creation of man in the image of God by that Word, which in the beginning was with God and was God; and the restoration of man, by the same Word, when he had emptied himself of his glory and made himself of no reputation, and dwelt and suffered among us in the form of a servant; the state of the soul in its separation from the body, and the re-appearance of both before the Judgment Seat of Christ; the joys of Heaven and the terrors of Hell,—all these form a part of the revelations of the Almighty, and must needs stimulate the curiosity of the believer, without affording a hope of its full gratification. For if the Bible be sometimes not intelligible, even when it speaks to us of earthly things, how can we be

astonished when we find it speaking of heavenly things which we are at a loss to understand? "Secret things belong unto the Lord our God^a," and, except so far as they are essential to our salvation either as the principles or motives of practice, we have no right to demand an entire and unclouded knowledge of their nature and properties. The secret things of the Lord our God are what even the powerful and penetrating energies and intelligence of the Holy Angels desire to look into; and, therefore, though it be not unrighteous in us to indulge a similar desire, yet with the weak and limited capacity of a mere mortal being, clogged with infirmities and chained to matter and the world, it would be presumptuous indeed to entertain a hope of our curiosity being gratified beyond the bounds of a strict and palpable necessity.

9. Add, finally, to all this amazing multitude, and variety, and length, and breadth, and height, and depth of the contents of Holy Writ, the narrow space in which it comprehends so much, and the extreme brevity with which it treats of all; and the catalogue of the causes in which its difficulties arise, will have been satisfactorily closed. For where much that is partially incomprehensible and awfully abstruse, is expressed in a few short

^a Deut. xxix. 29.

sentences, and conveyed under images deduced only from the imperfect analogy which subsists between things common and visible, and things invisible and unknown, there cannot but be frequent omissions of those intermediate links in the great train of theological reasoning, which could alone have facilitated our perception of the strength and fitness, and continuity of the whole. Even were it possible for us to apprehend the fulness of the divine mysteries in their complete extent, still the limited pages of a single volume would be too short to allow of so vast a range of information being impressed, without obscurity, upon the slowness and weakness of a mere mortal mind.

I urge not these observations as having the merit of novelty, or as exhausting a subject so copious and large. I would be considered rather as having arranged, than invented, and as having made a selection of the principal, rather than a specification of the whole of those causes to which Theologians have traced, in the Scriptures, the origin of "things hard to be understood." Imperfect however as the statement may in reality be, it will still be found sufficient to answer the purpose it was intended to serve, and to shew that, if we consider the Bible only as the work of man, both its contents and its origin are such as to render the existence of its difficulties

an unavoidable and unobjectionable consequence. For these difficulties spring not from any want of character or capacity in the Authors, but from the subjects upon which they treat, the languages in which they wrote, and the circumstances under which they composed. Whether the obscurities be of a philosophical, philological, or historical kind ; whether they belong to the doctrines, the precepts, or the prophecies of the Scriptures, it is the reader's, and not the writer's, ignorance which creates and continues them. The sacred penmen wrote as all ordinary men in the same situation would and must have written, and it is only by reason of a change in the state and aspect of the world which no human power or foresight could prevent, and from the operation of causes whose influence no human composition could escape, that darkness and ambiguity have in so many instances supervened. To the Authors of the Bible, therefore, in their situation as men, and to the Bible itself, if it be regarded only as the composition of men, the frequent occurrence of such a variety of " things hard to be understood," cannot be considered as any serious or solid objection. Every other similar work would inevitably have been affected in a similar manner, and if revelation appears to have been operated upon in a greater degree, it is because its antiquity is higher, its languages more intricate, its matter

more abstruse, and the ages and countries in which it was produced more dissimilar from those to which we ourselves belong ; but principally because it has been so minutely, so jealously, and often so captiously searched. As an inspired work it may indeed still be liable to censure for the “hard things” it contains, though I shall afterwards attempt to shew that even under this character, its mysteries and difficulties are of essential and indispensable use. But those who deny or limit the inspiration of the Bible, must at any rate allow that the existence of obscurity in its pages, is capable of the clearest explanation, and altogether free from blame.

1. Such, then, is the origin of Scripture Difficulties ; and the necessity of human learning for their elucidation follows as an immediate and undeniable inference. For the obscurity which is occasioned by ignorance can be removed only by the possession and employment of knowledge. Nor will the illustration of these scriptural “things hard to be understood” require only the application of a few particular branches of knowledge. The whole range of literature and science must be called in to minister to the purpose. If the antiquity and peculiarities of the languages in which revelation has been communicated, have given rise to many grammatical, and the various ages and countries

of which it treats, to many chronological, geographical, and historical difficulties, the departments of philology, antiquities, and criticism must be carefully and diligently adapted to their solution. So long as prophecies are pregnant with doubtful interpretation, poetry and prophecy must be skillfully compared, and the rules of criticism, as applicable to each, be duly distinguished and explained. Wherever the mysterious subjects embraced in the dispensations of Providence to man leave the mind incapable of forming any distinct apprehension of the truths revealed, there the powers and limits of the human understanding must be ascertained ; and so long as the precepts of the Bible lead to any ethical, its doctrines to metaphysical, and its other statements to philosophical and miscellaneous difficulties, so long must the principles of morality, of metaphysics, and of nature, together with a large and varied mass of general information, be brought forward into use. Thus every part of human knowledge will in turn be called into play, and without its assistance the obscurities of Scripture continue unremoved.

2. The necessity of the cultivation of the human faculties, in every possible way, and upon every possible subject, for the purpose of acquiring that knowledge which the solution of Scripture Difficulties demands, is the next inference deduci-

ble from their existence. Inspiration has ceased. Extraordinary communications of the powers and information requisite for the just interpretation of God's word, have long been withdrawn; and the ordinary modes of attainment through the means of regular education and laborious industry remain as the only avenues to any of the heights of human learning. Some, therefore, must be brought up as Naturalists, as Historians, as Linguists, as Moralists, as Metaphysicians, or as Antiquaries, and endeavour to push the discoveries of their predecessors beyond their present limits. In each particular branch of science, and in each leading department of literature, some must devote, and if any thing of real value to religion is to be attained, must exclusively devote their talents to its advancement; for the sphere is far too large for any single individual to attempt the whole, or even many of its parts.

3. But it would be unreasonable to expect that those whose hours and energies are principally employed in extending the conquests of the human mind in some particular direction, should have either inclination or leisure to give any considerable portion of their time to the application of their discoveries to the difficulties of revelation. Still less can it be expected that, even if inclined, they should be sufficiently acquainted with the princi-

ples of Expository Theology to know *how* to apply the discoveries they make to the elucidation of Scripture, in extraordinary cases at least, with the best effect. It would seem expedient, therefore, that in the division of literary labour, some should more especially and immediately appropriate their understanding to this task. Instead of Philosophers they must become Divines. Instead of seeking for reputation or emolument from inventions and discoveries of their own, they must be principally employed in acquiring a knowledge of what has been already done, and bringing the accumulated stores of former ages to bear upon "things hard to be understood." And who so fit to be appointed to this arduous task as those whose profession it is to serve about holy things, and to explain the rudiments, and perform the rites of the Christian faith? It will help them greatly in their sacred work. It will enable them to understand the whole counsel of God, and to declare it with wisdom and power; and whilst they establish the foundation of religion in its evidences, to build up its superstructure in the beauty of a solid holiness and a substantial and reasonable hope. The necessity of a learned Ministry, a Ministry deeply versed in the principles, and daily exercised in the uses of Theology, is therefore a third and most important inference to which the existence and variety of the Scripture Difficulties lead.

Since, then, there is this evident and intimate connexion between religion and learning, and this necessity for literature and science of every kind, let no one presume to despise it in any of its varied forms, nor, because some of its abstruser branches have been abused to the purposes of infidelity, preclude its general application to the difficulties of revelation. However speculative, however insignificant may be the studies we pursue, they will always, under the management of a judicious and humble mind, be found capable of illustrating some portion of Holy Writ; and without the united application of them all, the Scriptures can never be thoroughly vindicated and understood. There may be a difference in the value, and a danger of perversion in some kinds of knowledge; but there is not one which has not its theological use, and which, when temperately and religiously viewed, it is not both meritorious and necessary to make the object of research. The merit will be various, the necessity relative; and there will frequently be a difficulty in religiously and properly applying what has been acquired. Hence, as we observed, there is not only a demand for learning to be applied, but also for a learned Ministry to apply it to the purposes of religion. Let no one, therefore, who has undertaken that holy avocation ever deem himself at liberty to deviate from the calling

he has assumed, or make the literary character the mere road to honour, or the literary exercises of the mind a mere amusement in his vacant hours. In a man it is an excellent and honourable thing to enter upon the arduous path of knowledge, were it only as a means of obviating that listless vacuity of thought which drives so many down the broad and slippery ways of gaming or intemperance. In a gentleman it is a praise to be a sound scholar, a profound philosopher, or even a musician, a painter, or a poet; and to labour merely for the advancement of the science which he loves. But a Clergyman must have different impressions. Poetry and philosophy, and languages and history, and every other part of human knowledge he may cultivate, if he like; but it must not be so much for the sake of excellency in the accuracy and extent of what he acquires, as in the propriety and usefulness of what he learns, and its application to the support of Christianity, and the more general propagation of piety and truth. What the servant of Christ gains in literature and science, he must theologically direct to religious ends. When Bishop Watson was placed in a more conspicuous station in our establishment, he was called upon to renounce his chymical enquiries. Interesting as was the subject, and eminent as had been his success, he heard and gave heed to the call, and he did well; not because chymistry

is inconsistent with theology, but because, when pursued as a science and for itself, it is not theology, but philosophy. Nor did he, nor will any minister of religion lose, by a similar renunciation, his station and his dignity in the republic of letters. I know of nothing which so adorns and recommends the philosopher, as to find him not labouring merely in the vain curiosity to know, but, in the substantial effort to turn his knowledge to the comfort or improvement of his fellow-creatures: and in this merit the occupation of the theologian pre-eminently excels. For he takes not only the temporary, but the everlasting comfort; not only the intellectual, but the moral and religious improvement of man for his object. Theology, therefore, is the most dignified of all other sciences, because it essentially consists in the right use and proper application of them all. It is in fact, to use the happy remark of Locke, nothing less than the direction of all knowledge to its true end, the glory of the eternal God, and the eternal welfare of the human race.

LECTURE II.

EXISTENCE OF SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES
VINDICATED.

2 PETER III. 16.

“In which are some things hard to be understood.”

I ENUMERATED in my last Discourse a variety of causes to whose combined operation, or separate influence, the origin of Scripture Difficulties might be satisfactorily traced; and I endeavoured to shew that when the Bible is considered as a mere human composition, the existence of its difficulties is not only a natural, but an unavoidable and unobjectionable circumstance. So far, therefore, the unbeliever has no more right to complain of the obscurity of the Bible than of any other ancient work. From its character, had it been no more than the work of man, combined with the manner and place and period of its composition, the languages in which it speaks, the matter to which it refers, and the comprehensive brevity with which it is drawn up, “things hard to be understood”

would have been one of its necessary accompaniments: and if they appear to be more numerous or more important in the Bible than in other writings, the excess may be attributed to a superior degree of antiquity, to the more incomprehensible sublimity of its contents, and to its having, for very obvious reasons, been more minutely and jealously searched than is usual with books of a secular kind.

But however clearly we may have accounted for the origin of difficulties in the Bible as the work of man, we have not yet justified their appearance in it as, what it is in truth, the Word of God. The Scriptures, by claiming to be a divine revelation, claim to be something more than a mere human composition, and are justly believed by every sound Christian to differ from every ordinary production of the human mind in this important particular, that they were “given by inspiration of God^a.” Whether this difference ought to have made any considerable difference in the intelligibility of their contents; whether, and how far the inspiration of God ought to have precluded the presence, altered the nature, or modified the extent of Scripture Difficulties, falls, in order, therefore, under our notice as the second subject of enquiry. Having in the former

^a 2 Tim. iii. 16.

Discourse delineated the causes of difficulties, we must proceed, in the present and following Lecture, to examine whether their existence be consistent with the character of the Bible as an inspired work.

To guard, however, against any misapprehension in the discussion of this point, it may be necessary previously to remark, that the possibility of an entire freedom from difficulties in any inspired production, is not at all the matter in debate. Readily and thankfully do we confess that with the Almighty, from whom inspiration proceeds, dwelleth the fulness of all wisdom, both human and divine, and that he knoweth what is in man, and that with him all things are possible. To the mind and power of the Almighty, therefore, it would have been as easy to have poured the light of revelation into the understandings both of the intelligent and illiterate in every successive generation of mankind, as it was, at the creation, to make the sun to shine with equal clearness both upon the just and upon the unjust, in every successive clime which that luminary enlivens with the daily visitation of his beams. But was it expedient, or would it have been right so to do? This is the real point at issue ; for though God can do all things in the mightiness of his strength, yet are there many things

which in the discretionary exercise of omnipotence he has willed to leave altogether undone. The wisdom and the propriety, therefore, and not the possibility of an absence of all difficulties from a divine revelation are the things we are called upon to decide : and it is of little importance to urge how easy it would have been for divine inspiration to have made the Scriptures intelligible, without labour, to all, unless it can at the same time be shewn, that it would have been expedient so to do. If that expediency can be clearly made out, there is, at once, an end of the debate. If the removal of all difficulties from Holy Writ could be proved advantageous in many respects, and detrimental in none, then indeed a sufficient reason would have been shewn for inspiration to interfere with the exercise of her preventive power. But if the benefits which we derive from the presence of "things hard to be understood," be not only considerable in themselves, but such as could by no other obvious method have been supplied ; and if these benefits be found upon a careful examination to be not only enough, but more than enough, to counterbalance the concomitant inconveniences ; if, in fact, we should have lost much and gained little, or nothing, by the absence of all difficulties from the Bible, then may we safely and fairly conclude, that it was both wise and prudent to permit them

to appear, and that it would have been most unreasonable to demand Inspiration to interpose for their exclusion. And what it would have been wrong in her to banish, it must be right in her to retain.

Having thus obtained a sufficient and satisfactory criterion of the propriety and expediency of difficulties having a place in Holy Writ, let us next proceed to apply it. Let us, first of all, examine what are the advantages which result from the presence; or, in other words, what are the disadvantages to which we should have been subjected by the absence of "things hard to be understood." Let us next consider the disadvantages which result from the presence of "things hard to be understood;" or, in other words, the advantages we should have gained by their absence; and then, finally, from a review of both, let us carefully and impartially estimate whether the consequences of their removal, would not have been, upon the whole, detrimental both to the stability of the Christian's faith, and the progressive improvement of man's rational nature.

I. That the stability of the Christian's faith would have been materially affected by the obliteration from the Bible of every kind of "thing hard to be understood," is evident from this

single consideration; that from the existence of some kinds of Scripture difficulties at least, advantages of solid importance, in an evidential point of view, have been frequently derived, and that some of the best internal arguments in favour of revelation, have been actually deduced from the very nature of its difficulties.

1. What, for instance, is the character of those internal evidences to which we commonly appeal for a proof of the genuineness and authenticity of the Scriptures? It is to their philological and historical *difficulties* that for this purpose we most generally turn. It is to the peculiarities of the Scripture style, and to the multiplicity of the Scripture allusions to the manners and customs of the ages and countries in which we affirm them to have been written, and the sentiments and actions of those of whom they treat. These are the topics on which we most strongly and successfully insist. We resort to these themes, because we feel justly convinced, that such difficulties are the best internal arguments we can use upon the subject; since had the Bible been so framed that it might have been alike understood by men of every capacity and in every age, it could have had none of the characteristic features which would have fixed its composition to any particular person or period.

Strip the Bible, then, of all those peculiarities which so evidently originate in the circumstances under which it was produced, and you will rob it for ever of one of the best internal marks of its having been produced under those circumstances. So far, therefore, as philological and historical "things hard to be understood," corroborate the external evidences for the genuineness and authenticity of the Scriptures, so far is their permitted existence influential, and, consequently, beneficial, in the formation of every enquiring Christian's faith. Hence we may state it as the first of those disadvantages to which we should have been subjected by the removal of all difficulties from the Bible, that we should have lost a direct and very powerful internal evidence in favour of its genuineness and authenticity.

2. But the faith of the Christian requires not only to be formed, but also to be protected and preserved. Amidst the bustle of worldly business the direct and positive evidences in favour of revelation are too frequently forgotten, almost as soon as learnt; and, even where remembered, they are apt to lose their influence over the mind by losing the charm of novelty to the imagination. It is, therefore, highly expedient that we should have a constant opportunity

of fortifying the unsteadiness or weakness of our belief by the aid of some indirect and incidental arguments which, arising up from time to time with all the freshness of unexpected discoveries, may strengthen our dependence upon the general proofs of the divine origin of the Bible, and renew, at intervals, our fading remembrance of their force. Now as the ordinary philological and historical difficulties contribute to give the first origin to our belief in the truth of the Scriptures, so do those of a more arduous nature tend to its preservation and protection when formed. For it is constantly happening that things hardest to be understood are receiving a complete elucidation ; and every great obscurity elucidated is an objection removed ; and every objection removed affords one of the best, because most unsuspecting, testimonies to the truth and authority of any writing.—But, instead of reasoning upon the justice of this remark, let us at once endeavour to illustrate and apply it by selecting from the history of theological science one or two of the most obvious examples by which it has been sometimes so irresistibly confirmed.

It is well known, then, that it had long been a matter of wonder to find St. Paul, when brought before the Jewish Sanhedrim, expressing himself

as if ignorant that Ananias, their President, was the High Priest ; though, at the very moment, Ananias was sitting before him in his judicial capacity, and perhaps also in his Pontifical robes. “ I wist not, Brethren, that he was the High Priest^a,” said the Apostle, when rebuked for censuring him ; and the saying undoubtedly seemed strange, until the researches and ingenuity of Michaelis^b drew forth facts from the history of the times, which removed the wonder at once. He has shewn that Ananias had indeed been for a very short time in possession of the power, but was still without any just claim to the authority of the Pontifical office ; and that, consequently, the ignorance which St. Paul expressed, and which, at first sight, appears merely assumed as an excuse for his own conduct, was either, as it easily might be under such circumstances, real ; or else was intended as a reproof to the usurpation of his Judge.

Again, It had often been alleged as an objection to the historical accuracy of the New Testament, that it gave the title of Proconsul to the Governor of Cyprus^c, when, in strict propriety, he could only be styled Prætor of the

^a Acts xii. 9.

^b Marsh's Michaelis, Vol. I. Part I. Ch. ii. Sect. 11.

^c Acts xiii. 7.

Province. So strongly did this apparent inaccuracy weigh with Beza, that he absolutely attempted to remove it by his mode of translating the text; and our own Authorized Version seems, in like manner, to have evaded the difficulty by adopting the neutral term "Deputy" instead of the correct title of Proconsul. A medal however has since been discovered on which the very same title is assigned about the same period to the Governor of the same province, and thus the difficulty has vanished for ever. But it has not vanished without leaving a strong evidence of truth behind^a. For discoveries like these are of incalculable importance to the believer in the evil hour of temptation. When, as in the former instance, a passage which had long puzzled our understanding receives at last an unexpected and satisfactory interpretation, assurance revives with double energy. Or when, as in the latter of the two cases, the learning or ingenuity of some laborious Antiquary or Divine, has met with an inscription on a marble or a coin which had hitherto been overlooked or unknown, and, by applying it to some difficulty under which we were labouring, gives a clear and happy solution of the whole, a new and unwonted vigour is immediately communicated to

^a Lardner's Credib. Part I. B. I. Ch. i. Sect. 11.

our faith. For an apparent objection to the credibility of the Bible has thus been turned into a real evidence of its truth, and the consequence which naturally follows is that of giving an additional degree of confidence to our reliance upon a religion whose very weakness has been proved to be strength. The beneficial influence of the elucidation, and consequently of the existence of Scripture difficulties, is, therefore, manifest not only in the production of belief at first, but also in nourishing and maintaining it when produced.

3. From the previous remarks it is plain that had no obscurity whatever been permitted to remain upon the pages of Holy Writ, we should have sustained a considerable loss of the internal evidence of its genuineness and authenticity. This will, I think, be generally allowed; but still it may be imagined that this advantage would have been sufficiently secured had the Scriptures, instead of being overwhelmed with such frequent and serious darkness, been shaded only by a few slight and temporary "things hard to be understood." It may be admitted that *some* difficulties would have been useful or even necessary; but it may be argued that, as the case stands with regard to the Bible, they are both greater and more numerous than is at

all requisite either for the creation or preservation of our faith. This reduces the question to a question, not of fact, but degree, a kind of question which is of all others the most arduous to determine. Without entering, however, into any idle estimate of the precise number of difficulties with which the Bible abounds, and then as idly attempting to settle whether it be the exact number it ought to have contained, we may generally and positively assert in opposition to the objection alleged, that the magnitude and continuance are as essential to the permanent credibility of the Bible, as the temporary existence of some few “things hard to be understood.”

First, suppose the difficulties of Scripture had been slight and capable of being easily removed ; and then mark the consequence.

The intellectual world is composed of the learned and illiterate in various degrees, and the learned, from the pride of reason, are perhaps more exposed to the temptation of renouncing revelation than their humbler brethren. The learned are more peculiarly, therefore, in want of those new and continually increasing arguments for the soundness of their belief, which the gradual elucidation of difficulties supplies

Hence it is necessary that the difficulties of Scripture, in order to answer the beneficial purpose of protecting and preserving the faith of the cultivated and scientific, should be such as the cultivated and scientific will feel. But if all the difficulties of Scripture were slight in their nature, it is plain that the well-informed and thinking portion of mankind would either feel them slightly or not at all, and consequently have their faith but slightly, if at all, confirmed by their elucidation. "Things hard to be understood," should, therefore, in some instances at least, be *very* hard to be understood, or they will cease to be advantageous in renewing or strengthening the convictions of those, whose convictions are in most danger of wearing away,—the scholar and the philosopher.

Again, were Scepticism the growth only of some particular ages, it would have been sufficient that those ages only should have enjoyed the benefits derived from the elucidation of difficulties. But the Spirit of Infidelity, like the air we breathe, pervades every period; and every successive generation of mankind will be subject to its insinuating operations so long as there lurks a passion within the human breast to make it wish the restraints of religion untrue. It is, therefore, requisite that every successive generation of man-

kind should have difficulties to elucidate ; or, in other words, that difficulties should always exist. A gradual solution is what the stability of the Christian faith demands, so that the continuance would seem as necessary as the magnitude of some “ things hard to be understood.”

Lastly, had the difficulties of Scripture been extremely limited in their number, they would have excited but little attention, and so have become comparatively inefficient in either renewing or confirming us in our belief.

For all these reasons, it is clear, that to render Scripture difficulties really and universally beneficial, their present multitude and magnitude could scarce have been safely diminished ; whilst to render them permanently useful, it is equally requisite that a considerable portion should remain to be explained by each succeeding age. Not only ought there to be some and slight, but many and great “ things hard to be understood ;” and they should be found there not only yesterday and to-day, but yesterday, to-day, and for ever. And such in the Bible is actually the case.

The preceding considerations apply, though with different degrees of force, to the existence of every difficulty which bears testimony to the

genuineness and authenticity of the Scriptures. All those obscurities, therefore, which are founded upon the nature of the languages employed ; all the geographical, chronological and historical darkness, which arises from that imperfect and indistinct recapitulation of times, and places, and events, so common in the writings of authors contemporary with the facts they record ; all the obstacles created by that multiplied, and often remote, allusion to particular manners, and customs, and laws, which is almost unavoidable, when a person is conscious of addressing those who are as thoroughly acquainted with such circumstances as himself ; all those difficulties, in short, which depend upon the laws of criticism, or the knowledge of antiquities for their solution, and which so often serve to ascertain the precise period and country in which the different books of the Bible were composed, may now be regarded as having been satisfactorily shewn to be beneficial, by the arguments already urged.

4. But, besides the philological and historical difficulties thus specified, there are many others in the Book of God of a very different character, and originating in sources to which the statements thus far entered into cannot possibly be made to apply. These are the great mysteries of godliness and iniquity ; the doctrines of

sanctification and faith ; the histories of the fall and redemption of man ; and many dark and dubious predictions of events still future, which, together with a multitude of other “hard things,” might have been written by men of any country, and in almost every age. Obscurities like these have no immediate connection either with the genuineness or authenticity of the work in which they appear, and must, consequently, be vindicated upon different principles. They are principles, however, the discovery of which will require neither a long nor a laborious search. Of the predictions alluded to, I deem it, indeed, almost unnecessary to speak at all. The obscurity of unfulfilled prophecies has been shewn to be almost essential to their purpose ; and though the same cannot be said with regard to the other difficulties enumerated, yet this we may safely affirm ;—that by clearing away the darkness of all the incomprehensible wisdom of Scripture mysteries, we should have blotted out of the Book of Life one very plausible confirmation of its having proceeded from that omniscient Being who, when he speaks at all, may naturally be expected to speak of matters beyond the grasp of our limited comprehension. It thus appears, therefore, that the very same kind of internal evidence which is afforded by the philological and historical difficulties of the Bible to its genuineness and au-

thenticity as a mere human composition, is afforded by what we call its mysteries, to its divine authority as one of the revelations of Heaven. The appearance of these latter, therefore, as well as of the former, is beneficial, and the absence of both would be alike injurious to the internal evidence of the Scriptures.

II. The next benefit which the difficulties of Scripture produce, is that of contributing to the improvement of man's rational nature, and his advancement in the scale of intellectual being, by that exercise of the understanding which their solution requires, and that dignity they confer on every kind of study.

The connection between religion and learning, as a consequence of the existence of "things hard to be understood," has been already pointed out; and the necessity both for literature and science, in all their variety and extent, for the elucidation of the Bible obscurities has been concluded and fixed. The benefits resulting from that connection are what we are now concerned to establish; for whatever these benefits may be, they are evidently to be referred, in the last resort, to those obscurities which demand the employment of knowledge for their elucidation.

We may remark then, that the difficulties of Scripture, by linking religion and learning in an inseparable bond of union, have given a dignity and use to every description of knowledge, whether of the polite and ornamental, or of the practical and experimental kind, which without that connection would never have accrued.

1. Half our pleasures, our best pleasures, the most innocent and congenial to our nature as rational beings, are derived from the acquisition of ornamental knowledge, the pursuit of entertaining science, or the practice of elegant arts. So far, therefore, as mental recreation is requisite for man, the study of such things may be justified without referring to any thing but the satisfaction of the individual himself in his vacant hours. But beyond the point of strict necessity for relaxation, this reason will never extend. There must be a higher aim, an honourable and substantial end to be gained before any considerable employment of the powers of the understanding in the acquisition of any lighter species of intellectual attainment can be fairly vindicated ; and that vindication the difficulties of Scripture afford. For the golden chain of science is so firmly and admirably formed, that it would be impossible to take away the least link without injuring the strength and beauty of the whole. Since, therefore, the whole body of

knowledge tends, in consequence of the existence of difficulties, to the elucidation of Scripture, the cultivation even of the merely ornamental parts of learning is requisite to the defence of revelation, and consequently justifiable in a still larger extent than it would have otherwise been. The minutest branches of philosophy, and the most trivial recreations of the mind thus become important in a religious point of view. We are evidently, therefore, and deeply indebted to the difficulties of Scripture, because by making every species of knowledge subservient to the illustration and vindication of religious truth, they have dignified and sanctified, as it were, the scientific amusements of our leisure hours, and heightened the pleasure of studying the subordinate branches of literature, by teaching us that we may be usefully employed even in our intellectual relaxations.

2. If from the easy and ornamental we pass on to the more arduous, but more profitable, parts of knowledge, we shall find our reflections terminating in similar conclusions. All those branches of art and science which tend to promote the comforts of our present state of existence, would still have been necessary; and in all those studies which teach the means of being innocently happy ourselves, and preventing others from disturbing, more than can be avoided, the fulfilment of our

wishes and wants, there would still have been an importance and use, had there not been a single obscurity to be removed by the application of learning. But that necessity, importance, and use, would then have been proportionally less, because confined to the promotion of our temporary welfare here. Thus the separation between the man of science and of piety, would have been far more decided than it now is. Had ordinary learning been but slightly connected with spiritual knowledge, the man of piety would have been far more apt than he now is to despise and neglect it, as of no use in giving him the understanding of his faith and duties ; and the man of learning would, in return, have been far more apt than he now is, to condemn religion, as but little careful of the most important and dignified part of man's nature, his rational soul and intellectual faculties. But as the case really stands, and in the face of such an undeniable call for learning to illuminate the dark places of revelation, though fanaticism, in her blindness, may, and has sometimes endeavoured to depreciate, she can never be successful in altogether banishing literature and science from the household of faith. Nor can philosophy, in her pride, though she may often with justice condemn the Christian individual, as having been an enemy to the progress of mental improvement, ever properly and fairly comprehend the Christian

religion itself in the same rebuke. Christianity demands knowledge of every description for the elucidation and defence of its claims, and thus dignifies the children, the patrons, and the use of every form of human wisdom.

Such are the positive benefits of which we should have been deprived by the absence from the Scriptures of “things hard to be understood;” and such, consequently, are the grounds upon which I would rest the propriety and expediency of their presence, notwithstanding the inspiration of the work in which they are found. Whether these benefits may not be invalidated, or perhaps overbalanced, by corresponding disadvantages; whether there be not reasons against the existence of Scripture Difficulties of greater weight than any which we have produced in their favour, remains to be considered in the next Discourse; in which I shall examine the objections which may be alleged against the statements here advanced, and endeavour to shew, from a comparison of the advantages with the inconveniences of “things hard to be understood,” that we should in reality have lost much, and gained but little, by their removal from the Bible.

LECTURE III.

OBJECTIONS TO THE EXISTENCE OF DIFFICULTIES IN
THE SCRIPTURES AS AN *INSPIRED* WORK
CONSIDERED.

2 PET. III. 16.

“ In which are some things hard to be understood.”

As the cloud which drops fatness upon the earth, dims, at the same time, the brightness of the day, and brings an uncomfortable chillness on the air, notwithstanding the blessings it pours down ; so the difficulties of Scripture, whatever may be the benefits which they confer, and however powerfully they may contribute by their existence to call forth the energies of the human mind, and by their elucidation, to increase and strengthen the Christian's faith, are yet undeniably attended with certain corresponding inconveniences, inas-much as they both obscure the distinctness of the contents of revelation, and create a partial and transitory interruption to the faith of weak and unlearned and inconsiderate Christians.

Nor is it in these points alone that the obscurities of nature and of grace resemble each other. The manner in which they operate upon different individuals, or upon the same individuals under different states of feeling and in different circumstances, is also in many respects similar. The husbandman is delighted to behold the rain descend upon the earth, in the hope of having his fields refreshed and fertilized by the genial moisture: and not only does he willingly suffer the suspension of his labours, and his confinement at home, for the sake of the advantages which he expects ultimately to reap; but he actually rejoices in the storm, and turning away his thoughts from the sufferings of the houseless wanderer, looks upon the raging of the elements with an eye of the most grateful and unmingled satisfaction. The traveller, on the other hand, whose feelings are sensibly affected by the gloomy darkness of the day, and the comfortless character which his journey in consequence assumes, forgets that the general interests of man are connected with the benefits of the fertilizing showers, and is apt to murmur at every step, and to fix his repining meditations only upon the inconveniences to which he is personally subject. In the same exclusive and partial manner do men of different complexions contemplate in the Bible "things hard to be understood." The sceptical

and philosophic enquirer is angry at every obscurity which checks the boundless aspirations of his mind after universal knowledge, or gives him only an indistinct and imperfect view of those mysterious beings whom his curiosity desires to "see face to face." Irritated by the clouds and darkness which rest upon the heights of divine philosophy, he reflects upon nothing but his own disappointment, and condemns without a limitation, every thing in revelation which serves to retard his ambitious progress. However great or general the advantages derived from the difficulties of the Bible may appear to others, he feels them not, allows them not, examines them not. He feels only that the darkness of God's word teaches him the limited range of his mental, as well as his bodily eye; and he is too much mortified by the humiliating lesson, to perceive that it is in kindness that the lustre of an unclouded light has been withheld, and that perhaps, in his mortal and finite state, a partial knowledge of divine things is all that his intellectual organs could receive. Such, however, be the cause what it may, is too often the conduct of the sceptic: whilst on the other hand, and in direct opposition to such an unjust censure, the idle and less inquisitive Christian sits down contented under the shelter of a blind, unthinking and implicit faith. Satisfied to see all things "as through a glass

darkly," he not only consoles himself under his ignorance of what he does not, with the advantages he derives from what he does comprehend; but he has no patience with those who desire to "know even as they are known," and not the smallest pity for such weaker brethren as may feel the security and fulness of their belief disturbed, though but for a moment, by the occurrence of those hard things which they cannot understand. He finds his own reliance perhaps strengthened, rather than interrupted by the dark places of Holy Writ, and with the most uncharitable inattention to the different constitution of different minds, he condemns every attempt to reconcile the mysteries of revelation by the principles of reason, as useless, and holds those as deserving only the name of Heretics or of Infidels, who experience or express the slightest repugnance to admit, without examination or thought, every thing which the Bible records, whether easy or hard, whether obvious or abstruse, whether explicable or inexplicable to the human faculties. The one forgets the benefits of Scripture difficulties, and the other disregards their inconveniences.

Those, however, who would think or reason aright upon any theological subject, must be careful to fall into the error of neither party. They

must give their due weight to the arguments of both, and balancing them with a steady hand, assign the preference only where the preference is due. Now this was by no means the method we pursued in the last Discourse. It was the benefits derived from Scripture difficulties that there occupied our attention alone; and they certainly seemed great enough, when separately considered, to justify their appearance in Holy Writ. But that was only an advocate's view of the case. It will be necessary, therefore, in the present instance, to bring into notice the objections which may be urged against the arguments there advanced, and after comparing both to pronounce a final decision. For thus only will that decision be made satisfactory and correct.

1. The first benefit I mentioned as arising from the ordinary difficulties of Scripture, was this; that those of a philological and historical kind afford strong internal evidence of the genuineness and authenticity of the sacred writings. But to this it may be objected that the genuineness and authenticity of the sacred writings might have been sufficiently supported by external evidence, without encumbering them with difficulties for the sake of the additional and supernumerary arguments derived from internal proof.

No doubt this might have been done ; and no doubt, the external evidences would have been satisfactory to every impartial mind, even unaided and alone. But it is not many minds that, in subjects of a religious nature, can be expected to be impartial, or even commonly just in their judgements. Were every evil passion hushed, every vain imagination subdued, and every worldly and fleshly lust mortified, the still small voice of conscience would then bear an unresisted sway over the will, and the calm authority of reason assert her legitimate opinion over faith. But who has ever looked into his own heart and found it so? What Christian has ever read of the fall of man and does not acquiesce in the belief that its consequences are still visible in the confusion of his rational, and the depravation of his moral faculties? Or who finds the righteous image of God so vividly and deeply stamped upon his own soul, as not sometimes to feel, that the proofs of the divinity of his religion, strong and reasonable as they are, have yet scarce power enough to keep him back from sin and unbelief? And who that so feels his langour, his levity and his lusts, would venture to abate one jot or tittle from that evidence, either external or internal, which, energetic and varied as it is, has only just energy enough to overcome his repugnance to believe, and only just variety enough to keep

his slumbering sensibilities awake to the value of eternal things? Yet to take away all the difficulties of Scripture, would certainly be to take away much of their present force from the arguments in favour of the Jewish and Christian revelations. For though the external evidences of the Bible would have remained precisely the same both in nature and number, had not a single obscurity been allowed to dim its pages, yet they could not then have been considered the same in weight, and influence over the human mind; because they would then have wanted the confirmation of internal proof. So much, therefore, as the confirmation of internal proof strengthens the hands of external evidence, so much is the loss the believer would have sustained by the absence of "things hard to be understood," and so much more arduous would have been his struggle against the devil, the world, and the flesh.

To a believer, then, I apprehend the objection will be found destitute of all force. He will admit that external evidence would indeed have been enough to prove the genuineness, and authenticity, and divine origin of the sacred writings, without any of those internal arguments which difficulties afford; but, feeling his own weakness in the faith and corruption in the natural man, he will be deeply grateful for their additional aid,

because conscious that, even with that aid, the proofs of Christianity are, after all, not more than enough to keep him steadfast to his Redeemer and his God.

But if the believer himself thus think, what can the unbeliever say? He who resists with such pertinacity the combination of both species of evidence,—the union both of external and internal proof,—would with double boldness, and with much more reason, have rejected the former, if alone. Had there been no philological and historical difficulties to indicate the age and authors of the Bible, the sceptic would have pressed strongly, upon us the deficiency of those internal marks of genuineness and authenticity which we demand and find in every other work. He would have asked, why the Scriptures differed from every other composition of man, in being deprived of the characteristic features of the periods and countries in which they were said to be produced; and why they were left to work their way to our belief by the mere solitary and unassisted force of external evidence? And what could the Theologian have answered to these questions? Most hopeless would it have been for him to attempt to account for the absence of philological and historical difficulties, by urging the inspiration of the Scriptures as the cause; because the inspi-

ration of a work can never be clearly established until its genuineness and authenticity have been allowed. If by first assuming the inspiration of a work its genuineness and authenticity would follow of course; and if by next assuming its genuineness and authenticity, its inspiration might be distinctly shewn; here, indeed, there would be a very high probability of both; but yet no solid proof of either. For in first reasoning for the genuineness of a work from its supposed inspiration, and then for its inspiration from its supposed genuineness, you do but argue in a circle, and, in fact, take for granted both the things to be proved. The Christian, therefore, would be manifestly premature in bringing forward the influence of God's holy Spirit as a means of accounting for the absence from the Scriptures of those philological and historical difficulties, which ought to have been present as a necessary part of the internal proof of their genuineness; because, until that genuineness has been first of all and independently established, the influence of the Spirit is but hypothetical.

Such would have been the effect of the absence of the historical and philological difficulties of Holy Writ. But still more unaccountable and objectionable would have been the absence of those of a mysterious and prophetic nature.

If the predictions of Scripture had been perfectly and universally clear, those already fulfilled would have been objected to as having been written after the event ; an accusation which has actually been brought against some whose terms and object are more than commonly explicit. Those which are still to receive their accomplishment would, in like manner, when completed, be censured as having produced their own fulfilment. To the absence of mysteries, too, objections of equal force would have arisen. That God should speak with all the simplicity of a man, and never once introduce an allusion to matters unknown, or too high for man's ordinary perceptions, would have been deemed, and, I think, justly deemed, as inconceivable, as that a philosopher should speak with the homeliness of a rustic, and never once refer to principles of science which were unknown or incomprehensible to the labourer. Had the Scriptures, therefore, been destitute of these " secret things," which reason alone is sufficient to convince us must " belong unto the Lord our God," a strong presumption would have ensued that those who wrote the Scriptures were not the instruments of Heaven for communicating any extraordinary revelation of the Divine will. Speaking always and only as any uninspired men might have spoken, they would with much plausibility have been concluded to be

uninspired ; and this conclusion would with much force have been insisted upon, not only as not strengthening, but as actually weakening the external evidence. The internal proof now enjoyed would, had there been no mysteries in Scripture, not only have been wanting, but positively opposed to that of an external kind.

Hence then, it is plain, that had the Bible been composed without its present difficulties, not only would much of its present internal evidence have been removed, but a new difficulty would in some instances have sprung up ; whilst, in others, though the external evidences would have been numerically the same, they would have been deprived of much of their present force. The sufficiency of external evidence alone cannot, therefore, be alleged as any satisfactory objection to the existence of those “ things hard to be understood ” which are directly productive of internal evidence ; because, without them, external evidence would sometimes not have been sufficient, and would always, by being weakened, have been rendered less influential upon the mind.

2. The second benefit of which I spoke as to be derived from Scripture difficulties, was that renewed confirmation of our sinking and

wavering faith which the elucidation of difficulties of an extraordinary and more arduous nature affords. I observed that when the direct and positive evidences of Christianity are beginning to lose their effect with their novelty,—or to be forgotten in the hurry of life,—or to be weakened by the arguments of infidelity, there is nothing which so immediately and decidedly operates to the restoration of our confidence in the Bible, as the explanation of some difficulty which seemed to be an objection to its truth. This benefit, however, may appear to some to be compensated, or perhaps even overbalanced, by the disadvantage of those doubts which difficulties must always create before their elucidation can acquire any great degree of evidential weight.

But is it then required that *all* causes of doubt should be taken away; or is it only to doubts arising from internal difficulties and “things hard to be understood,” that toleration is refused? If the former be intended; if men demand a demonstration of the truth of revelation so irresistible that perverseness itself cannot find a plea in justification of unbelief, they demand what, in religious matters, would destroy, virtually at least, the freedom of the will, and make life cease to be in intellectual, what it is

found universally to be in moral things, a state of trial and of discipline. Wherever we turn our eyes, Providence has thrown difficulties in the path in which we are commanded to walk, and has subjected the mind, as well as the heart, to its temptations to error. In natural religion and in moral philosophy; in what we are to believe and what we are to do in every social and civil and religious relation, we have obstacles to overcome in running aright the race that is set before us. Had revelation, therefore, been so cleared of difficulties that men could not possibly doubt, it would have violated all the notions we have derived from experience and meditation upon the usual course of God's dealings with his creatures. Some causes of doubt, then, there always must be left with regard to our belief in the Scriptures; because the exercise of faith by doubt, as well as of virtue by temptation, would seem to be one of the most just and general objects of our probation in this sublunary world. And if the trial of our faith, in some method or other, be thus necessary and right, what method, I would ask, could be imagined at once so merciful and so certain of attaining that end, as by the permitted existence of those "things hard to be understood," which, whilst they minister occasion for doubts, call forth at the same time our talents and diligence to solve

them ; and, when solved, become subservient to the more decided establishment of our belief? Thus in revelation also, as well as in nature, is the great Creator's universal law of tempering judgement with mercy fulfilled, and thus out of the very temptations which the difficulties of Scripture create, is there made a way to escape that we may be able to bear them. Why then should it be required, or how could it have been justified, that inspiration should interfere to banish those obscurities from the Bible, whose whole character and operation are in such strict harmony with the ordinary proceedings of the Almighty, both in natural religion and in moral things?

It has thus appeared that the presence in the Scriptures of "things hard to be understood" is positively beneficial in many respects: First, because the existence of the ordinary difficulties of a philological and historical kind affords a very cogent internal argument for the genuineness and authenticity of the Bible ; whilst at the same time the elucidation of such as are extraordinary and more particularly difficult, is of material use in protecting our faith from danger in the evil hour of temptation, and preserving it, in the bustle of worldly business, from decay. Secondly, because mysteries were to be expected as natural and almost necessary in a communi-

cation from infinite wisdom ; and would, therefore, if unnaturally and unnecessarily absent from the Bible, have thrown a strong and unanswerable suspicion upon its divine origin : Thirdly, because Scripture difficulties have dignified every kind of human learning, and sanctified every kind of literary and scientific pursuit, by rendering them capable of being employed in the service of religion ; which would not have been the case, in any thing like an equal degree, had no difficulties, or not so many, or so varied been found. These are the benefits we derive from the permitted existence of “ things hard to be understood ;” benefits of considerable weight both in an evidential and intellectual point of view. On the other hand, I do not deny that the existence of difficulties in Scripture is attended with one inconvenience. They are certainly liable to excite doubts in the mind. But this is only to say, in other words, that they try our faith ; which is by no means an objection to their appearance in the word of God ; because it is perfectly consistent with the general proceedings of Providence, in other ordinary things, that our faith should be tried ; and because they do it in the wisest and most merciful manner. Upon the whole, therefore, the balance seems to be decidedly in favour of the existence of “ things hard to be understood ;” more especially when

we reflect that their absence would have led to objections which it would have been impossible to remove. Consequently it would not have been wise, or proper, or expedient for inspiration to have interposed, to prevent the operation of those causes which, in any other ancient work of a similar kind, would necessarily have produced the difficulties which now appear in the Bible. In other words, the existence of difficulties is not inconsistent with the character of the Scriptures, as an inspired work.

Thus have we arrived at the conclusion we desired ; and having found by a strict and rigid scrutiny into the merits of the whole case, both the expediency and utility of difficulties in the inspired Word of God, we need no longer confine ourselves to the dry details of reasoning, but may be allowed to expatiate with warmth and gratitude upon the wisdom of their permitted existence, and to gather the whole of our remarks into one brief and comprehensive summary.

It is not then, merely upon the ground that the obscurities of revelation form no insuperable or even plausible objection to its inspired and heavenly origin, that we would defend their appearance and extent. *That* indeed we do firmly support and sincerely believe. But we support

also with equal firmness, and believe with equal sincerity, that they are of essential and positive advantage, both in an evidential and intellectual point of view. We maintain that, had no difficulties at all existed in the Bible, the faith of believers would have been deprived of a great portion of the present internal evidence in favour of that religion which the Bible contains. The human understanding too would, as we believe, in the absence of religious difficulties, have wanted one great stimulus to improvement, and human learning, by being confined in its application to the purposes of this life only, and having but little or no connection with the elucidation of religious truth, would have been liable to be despised as needless, or neglected as an incumbrance, by those whose thoughts and hopes and labours were directed principally to the attainment of heavenly things. So would piety have run the risk of becoming illiterate, and those who were struggling for eternity have neglected the tedious and painful acquisition of knowledge as irrelevant to the best interests of the soul; and hence the Christian, like the Mahometan world, would have sunk lower and lower in the scale of intellectual creation. But happily with us, that can never, as things are now constituted, be justly the result. So kindly, as well as skilfully, has Christianity been framed for the advantage of

man, that every good Philosopher, whatever be the subject of his studies, may, by applying the information he acquires to the illustration of the pages of Scripture, become a Theologian, if he will; and can, therefore, have no excuse for renouncing religion as the enemy of science. Every Theologian, at the same time, if he would indeed deserve the honour of the name, must of necessity endeavour to make himself a sound Philosopher; and has, therefore, no legitimate ground for stigmatising science in the abstract as an enemy of true religion. For so admirably is the scheme of redemption compounded of clearness and obscurity in its doctrines, that whilst every ordinary believer may perceive enough of the nature of his faith and calling to guide his conduct and enliven his hopes; the divine, if he would thoroughly defend and explain the whole mystery of godliness in all its bearings, must defend and explain it by the use of knowledge and argument; since it is by knowledge and argument alone that those difficulties can be removed which either affect the evidences or obscure the contents of revelation.

Yet mistake me not, nor so misinterpret my meaning, as if I would place science upon a level with piety, or raise ability above humility of mind, or make the exertions of the understanding super-

sede the influence of grace and of prayer. It is to shew the sceptic that the philosophy, of which he boasts, owes much of its necessity, and all its dignity, to that religion of meekness which his pride condemns, that I have dwelt so much upon the mutual connection and operations of science and the Gospel. But I believe, that it is still as it was in the beginning of the Gospel, and that not many rich, or noble, or wise, or mighty, after the flesh, are called into the true Church of Christ, or recognise and obey from the heart, the spirituality of its holiness. I know that "knowledge puffeth up," and that it is "charity" alone which "edifieth," and therefore shew I unto you a more excellent way. "If any man," says our Saviour, (and he makes no limitation to the learned and ingenious, and no exclusion of the uneducated or simple); "if any man is desirous to do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God^a." This was the full and faithful promise of Jesus, and his words are not wont to return unto him empty. There is, in fact, a devotional contemplation of Holy Writ, which is far more precious in the sight of God, far more improving to the heart, and of far more value to the saving of the soul, than all the intellectual lucubrations of a mind, however deeply imbued with the principles of earthly philosophy, and extensively versed


^a John vii. 17.

in the wisdom of the literary world. If a man would gather spiritual profit in its fullest extent from the study of God's word, he must kneel rather than sit down to search the Scriptures, and lift his eye in supplication to heaven, rather than fix it in speculation upon the phrases in which the commentators have recorded their opinions, their differences, and their errors. Thus and thus only can the most learned, or the most enlightened, be saved by what they read ; and I have felt it most peculiarly a duty to enforce this caution before the present audience. In an University the very air we breathe is intellectual ; the studies, the honours, the very walls of the place, are appropriated to the exercises of the head ; and in such an exclusive attention to the cultivation of the mental talents, the better, but less splendid, qualifications of the disposition and feelings, are too liable to be held as comparatively insignificant and mean. The love of God waxes often dim, where the love of literary distinction has pre-occupied the altar of the heart. There too often creeps a coldness over the imagination, and a captiousness over the mind of the abstract reasoner, which so deadens the delicate sensibilities of devotional tendencies, that were we to speak with the tongue of an angel upon holy things, we should speak to unheeding ears, did we not arrange our meaning in argument, and shew as much knowledge of the myste-

ries of nature and science, as of grace. There are some, it is to be feared, who assemble themselves together, to think rather than to feel, and desire to be told of the opinions they are to hold, rather than the deeds of godliness they are to perform.

But it is not merely as a caution to the intellectual that I thus speak ; but also as a word of consolation and encouragement to those to whom God in his wisdom has communicated a scantier portion of the riches of the understanding and knowledge. Let such Christians know and believe, that it is not for the glory of the discoveries we make in the deep things of the Spirit, nor for the success with which we devote our literary acquisitions to the elucidation of the difficulties of Scripture, that we shall be counted amongst the excellent of the earth before the throne of God ; but it is for those improvements in holiness, and in piety, which we have gathered from what we do understand. Let our learning be small or great, our talents many or few, if we have done our duty in that state of life into which it has pleased God to call us, God will reward our diligence in proportion, not to our gifts, but to our increase. The Gospel therefore is still entitled to the character it assumes. Notwithstanding all its mysteries and difficulties, it is still pre-eminently the

Gospel of the poor. To the poor in wealth it is the greatest treasure ; for it bequeaths to them the riches of an heavenly inheritance. To the poor in power it is the greatest strength ; for it gives them the arm of the Almighty for their support. To the poor in spirit it is the greatest consolation ; for it encourages them to patience, and cheers them under suffering, by the prospect of a place, and a period when all tears shall be wiped away, and sorrow and sighing shall be known no more. And, above all, to the poor in knowledge it is the greatest wisdom ; because it is “able to make” the most ignorant man “wise unto salvation,” notwithstanding the existence of “things hard to be understood.” But this is a subject whose consideration must be reserved for the next Discourse ; in which I shall proceed to examine, whether the difficulties of Scripture be at all inconsistent with spiritual edification, or at all injurious to its object and character, as a religiously instructive work.



LECTURE IV.

THE EXISTENCE OF DIFFICULTIES IN THE SCRIPTURES
NOT INCOMPATIBLE WITH THEIR OBJECT AS
A RELIGIOUSLY INSTRUCTIVE WORK.

2 PETER III. 16.

“ In which are some things hard to be understood.”

THAT in an ancient work composed by various authors, and at various times ; a work written in different and difficult languages, and upon the most different and difficult subjects ; a work comprehending the history of all ages, and of many nations, from the foundation of the world to the present time ; and that, not only a history of the ordinary transactions between man and man, but also of the extraordinary dispensations of Almighty God : that in such a work, when regarded as a mere human composition, we should meet with many “ things hard to be understood,” I have already shewn to be natural and almost unavoidable. I have also shewn that even if such a work, as inspired, were something more than a mere

human composition, still the mere fact of its inspiration would not render it by any means necessary or expedient, that it should be entirely destitute of those difficulties which, under similar circumstances, would attend upon any ordinary production of man. The existence of "things hard to be understood" in the Scriptures, whether considered as a common work, or as one of the inspired communications of the Creator to his creatures, is, therefore, in both cases clearly defensible.

But there still remains another point of view in which the Bible may be contemplated, and without the consideration of which all other arguments which apply to its difficulties would, however satisfactory as far as inspiration alone is concerned, be deemed partial and inconclusive. The Bible it will be remembered professes not only to have been "given by inspiration of God," but to have been inspired by God for the instruction of man; that is, "to have been written for our learning^a." It is under this double character, therefore, that it must ever be viewed. Its difficulties must be shewn to be not only consistent with its nature as an inspired, but also compatible with its object as an instructive work. For if there be any demonstrable incompatibility between the existing diffi-

^a Rom. xv. 4.

culties, and the intended instruction of the Scriptures, their defence must, after all, be given up, however useful they may be proved in any other respect.

This then is the last general argument against which we have to contend in favour of “things hard to be understood;” and in its fundamental principles it is perfectly correct. Did the Jewish and Christian revelations profess to lead us into “all truth,” without limitation or degree; did they pretend to open to us the recesses of every science, and to make us wise upon all imaginable subjects in earth or heaven, then, no doubt, the existence of “things hard to be understood,” of whatever kind, and to any extent, would be injurious to the end proposed, and of course both inexpedient and improper. If the Bible declared its intention of laying down, without the possibility of being mistaken, misinterpreted or misapplied, all the endless varieties of philosophical and literary edification, no literary or philosophical difficulties whatever ought to have a place in the table of its contents. But this is very far indeed from being the case. The only declared object of revelation is to make men “wise unto salvation^a,” and, for that purpose, it ministers not to questions of science, but of “godly edifying,” “that the man

^a 2 Tim. iii. 15.

of God may be perfect," not in all the varied branches of human research, but of heavenly righteousness, and "thoroughly furnished," not unto all literary, but "unto all good works^a." It distinctly claims, but it claims no more than to teach us the words, and shew us the way that leadeth unto everlasting life. It is only, therefore, when the difficulties which the Bible contains are, either in their nature or degree, destructive of that special and spiritual purpose, that they can be deemed any serious obstacle to its professed instructive character. If its words be so extremely liable to be misinterpreted or misunderstood, that few, however anxious, can draw from them the wisdom of salvation; if the way which it points out as the road to heavenly bliss, be so extremely intricate and dark, that few, even of the most acute and diligent, can find it; if the facts, the doctrines, or the precepts it proclaims, appear to the most impartial enquirers unrighteous, or to the most enlightened irrational; or if it be so confused, or contradictory, or trifling, as to be useless for the great end it assumes to have in view,—in all these cases, of course, we must necessarily admit that its difficulties form a solid objection to it in its instructive capacity; because they constitute a real objection to its supposed intention of being the guide to happiness and rule of life. But

^a 2 Tim. iii. 17.

if it be the “unlearned and unstable” alone who “wrest the difficulties of Scripture to their own destruction ;” if, when its meaning is hidden, it is hidden only “to them that are lost,” whose minds “the god of this world hath blinded^a,” that they should not see the things that belong to their everlasting peace ; if in things essential it be clear, and doubtful only in matters of inferior import ; if there be no portion of its contents which, when rightly interpreted, can give an example of encouragement to an ungodly life ; if there be no moral regulation which can fairly be considered as defective or dangerous, and no speculative proposition which may not be shewn reasonable in its own nature, or credible in consequence of the authority of him who propounds it,—then may we safely maintain that its partial obscurity is not incompatible with its office as a teacher of religious truth. Then also may we safely conclude, that if there be no incompatibility between the difficulties and the religiously instructive character of the Scriptures, it was not necessary, and, if not necessary, not expedient, to make every thing they contain alike intelligible to the idle and the industrious, the learned and the ignorant, in every age, in every country, and under every modification of circumstances. For by so doing some arguments of considerable weight in favour of the probability

^a 2 Cor. iv. 3, 4.

of the genuineness, the authenticity, and the divine authority of the Bible would have been lost^a: and nothing absolutely essential would have been gained; since all the fundamentals of faith and practice, all that God imperatively demands of his creatures, as the conditions of their eternal happiness, are presumed to have been so plainly and perspicuously revealed, that he who runs with the greatest energy and rapidity towards the mark of the prize of his high calling in Christ Jesus, provided only that he run honestly and sincerely, may both read and understand, believe and do them.

That objection to the truth and authority of the Scriptures which is founded upon the occurrence in them of “things hard to be understood,” is thus ultimately found to resolve itself into these two simple questions:—First, Are the Scriptures sufficiently clear upon all the fundamentals of religion, to every willing and ordinary capacity? Secondly, Amongst the various difficulties with which revelation is acknowledged to abound, are there any which, when correctly explained, and temperately and reasonably viewed, would lead a dispassionate and well-disposed mind from “the ways of God’s laws, and the works of his commandments?” These

^a See the second and third Discourses for an account of these arguments.

two questions form the whole of what we are absolutely interested to determine ; for if the former be affirmatively, and the latter negatively answered ; if the Bible do really contain with fulness, and convey with clearness, all the essential principles of faith and duty ; and if there really be no difficulties which can be justly made to minister to ungodliness in opinions or deeds, then most assuredly its difficulties, however numerous, or varied, or inexplicable, are not destructive of its only important object, as a religiously instructive work,—the spiritual edification of such as study it as the repository of saving truth, and apply to it as the fountain of eternal life. Let us, then, proceed to pass these two points, in succession, under our review, and consider them with as much brevity as their nature and importance will permit.

1. Let us examine whether the Scriptures be at once both explicit and complete upon all those leading branches of speculative and practical Theology, which are requisite to direct the efforts and fulfil the wants of human nature in her present ruined condition and this transitory life.—But upon this subject it is really almost superfluous to debate. Every part of the Gospel contains so much of the great outlines of religion, and details them in such easy and compendious

terms, that we have but to open the New Testament in almost any of its pages, and draw forth a scheme which none could either mistake or doubt. "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth^a," is the fundamental verity of the Gospel, and it "preaches repentance and remission of sins in the name^b" of the Son of God, declaring, at the same time, that "neither is there salvation in any other : for there is none other name under Heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved^c," but only the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It therefore, "commandeth all men every where to repent and believe the Gospel^d," proclaiming "that whosoever believeth in the Son of God, shall not perish, but have everlasting life^e." Thus intelligible are its doctrines ; and in its precepts both prohibitory and positive it is equally distinct. It affirms, that not only "the wicked shall be turned into Hell," but also "all the people that *forget* God^f." It proclaims that "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God^g." "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things

^a John iv. 24.

^c Acts iv. 12.

^e John iii. 16.

^g 1 Cor. vi. 9, 10.

^b Luke xxiv. 47.

^d Acts xvii. 30 and Mark i. 15.

^f Ps. vii. 17.

are true, whatsoever are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise^a," it beseeches us to "think on these things" and to do them; because he only will be saved "who doeth the will of his Father which is in Heaven^b:" And lastly, to enable and encourage men in the discharge of these duties, it promises the Holy Spirit to help the infirmities of them that pray for it, and to controul the weakness of the flesh in them that sincerely struggle against its lusts. Thus intelligible are the terms, and thus full and satisfactory the principles which the Scriptures are universally, and under every varied image, and in every possible form of expression, enunciating and inculcating upon the most unlearned and incapable. Nor is this a mere seeming simplicity, or a religion of barren and inoperative speculation. The fruits are visible in the history of the religious opinions of the world, wherever either the Jewish or Christian revelations have been known. Compare the assurance of the meanest Israelite upon the nature of God and what he requires from man, with the doubts, and errors, and fluctuations, even of the wisest of the Heathen Philosophers to whom the Law and the Prophets were un-

^a Phil. iv. 8.

^b Matt. vii. 21.

known, and the superior rectitude of views and sentiments in the uncultivated disciple of Moses, over the most sagacious scholars of Socrates, will stand forth wonderful and confessed. Compare the first Tusculan disputation of Cicero with any of our commonest Christian treatises upon the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, and the difference will appear equally striking. Whilst the Roman Orator proceeds slowly and insecurely, faltering at every step, and evidently doubtful to what his reasonings may lead: the Christian enquirer assumes a bolder and more erect attitude, treads the ground as if he felt conscious of its firmness, and keeping the conviction of the truth of a future and eternal life steadily in his eye, as the end at which he aims, hastens, sometimes almost too rapidly, to establish the necessity and certainty of a retributive state.—The Heathen seems always striving to learn what is the opinion he ought to form. The Christian talks as one who had already formed his opinion, and was labouring only to find arguments to convince others of its propriety. The one seeks for a conclusion, the other only for premises on which to build it. Such is the change produced upon the thinking and writing part of mankind by the perusal of the clear declarations of Holy Writ; and the unthinking and merely reading or hearing classes of the community have been equally bene-

fitted and informed. Wherever and whenever the Bible has been freely circulated, and its contents extensively known, that age or nation will be found possessed of proportionably sounder views in religion and morality than others; and the ignorance of the Scriptures and Idolatry of the Church in Popish times, when contrasted with the banishment of Idolatry, or modified explanation of the use and object of Images, which has taken place since the spread of the Scriptures by the Reformation, are as plain a proof that the Gospel is the Gospel of the poor, and that “the Law of the Lord is an undefiled Law, and giveth wisdom unto the simple^a,” as any reasonable enquirer would wish to possess. It cannot, therefore, be fairly denied that the Scriptures, whatever other “hard things” they may contain, are at least sufficiently full and clear upon all the fundamentals of faith and practice to every willing and ordinary capacity. Thus then may the first question proposed be answered, as we wished it to be, in the affirmative. In the principal and essential point the Bible *has* “the words of eternal life,” and may be shewn, by a reference both to reasoning and experience, to be “able to make men wise unto salvation” by its leading doctrines, and “thoroughly furnished unto all good works” by its leading precepts.

^a Ps. xix. 7.

2. Having thus seen that, generally speaking, the Bible is pre-eminently “profitable both for doctrine and for instruction in righteousness,” it only remains for us to examine, secondly, whether, amongst its difficult and mysterious passages, there be any which are either so dubious or liable to perversion, as to be of a dangerous or an immoral tendency : for in that case, and in that case only, can “things hard to be understood” be regarded as injurious to the object, and, therefore, indefensible in the pages of a spiritually instructive work. In fact, it is not the mere existence of some difficulties in revelation which constitutes the real matter in dispute between the Deist and the Christian, so much as the nature and extent of those difficulties which do occur : and this the Deist himself, by his conduct, seems virtually to allow. For though he sometimes talks of the Scriptures as “being written to be understood, if they were written for any purpose at all,” and would thence seem to infer, that in all parts, and upon all topics, they ought to have been so written as to be thoroughly and universally understood ; yet by the frequency and earnestness of his attempts to prove that particular passages, and precepts, and doctrines, are inconsistent with moral and religious edification, it is in a great measure implied that he is aware that such is, in reality, the only true ground of objection.

Else why employ so much time in passing a censure upon insulated difficulties as injurious to virtue and repugnant to the character of a just and holy God, when, if the appearance of any difficulties at all was altogether indefensible, he might, by establishing that single point, have swept away the whole in one general sentence of condemnation? To this point, therefore, it is that the Theologian is bound principally and seriously to attend. Leaving the consideration of the mere abstract fact of the existence of "*some things hard to be understood,*" as a fact whose propriety no reasonable man would deny, he must go on to the more arduous and extensive labour of examining the Scripture Difficulties in detail, and vindicating the character and tendency of each from the various aspersions and misrepresentations with which they have been loaded by the Unbeliever. This is his peculiar and most important task; and this task, after having already laid down those general arguments which serve to establish the general expediency of difficulties in a revelation, must hereafter also be mine. But before I proceed to the examination of any particular examples of "*things hard to be understood,*" I shall, first of all, endeavour to facilitate the execution of the laborious undertaking to myself, and prepare the minds of others for a due apprehension of the arguments I shall urge in

each individual case, by laying down those fundamental principles upon which, our attempts at the solution of all Scripture Difficulties ought uniformly to be conducted^a. I shall next endeavour to prevent the indulgence of those unreasonable expectations of universal success which are at once so prevalent and prejudicial to the faith of the world, by pointing out, as nearly as possible, that precise degree of success which is probable and necessary to be attained in such enquiries^b. Having dismissed these preliminary considerations and prepared the way for a more detailed investigation of the subject, I shall then give a compendious classification, and a comparative estimate of the importance of the different kinds of difficulties in Scripture^c. Finally, and because the sceptical perversions of the contents of Holy Writ are so numerous and varied, that, if all were to be answered, the world would neither receive nor read the books that would be written, I shall select some particular class for the purpose of immediate illustration, and, after having shewn in a few conspicuous instances^d the futility of those objections which are usually urged with such unhesitating boldness by the unbeliever, leave the reader to form his own conclusions upon the rest, and to wait with patience until the remaining

^a Lect. V, VI, and VII.

^c Lect. IX.

^b Lect. VIII.

^d Lect. X to XX.

darkness of revelation shall have been gradually dissipated by time, or the toil of succeeding enquirers.

Such is the plan it is my intention, with the blessing of God, to pursue in the subsequent Lectures; and I am led to it by motives both of a private and a public nature; both because it is prescribed as one of the duties of my laborious office, and because it seems more peculiarly called for in the present day. “To wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction” and that of others, has, no doubt, in every period of the Church, been the misfortune of the “unlearned” in godliness, and the “unstable” in the faith. But the evil has been more decidedly prevalent in these latter times, and the reasoners against revelation have assumed a far more positive and disrespectful tone than was ever known or heard of before. There has sprung up in these degenerate days a most pernicious class of infidels, who, without deigning, if indeed they were able, to enter into any serious reasoning upon the subject of religion, have been bad and bold enough to adopt all the conclusions of their predecessors as undeniably true. They scorn any longer to argue the case as doubtful, and assuming it as an admitted fact that revelation is incapable of any rational defence, they pour

forth the torrent of their abuse in language whose impiety and indecency I dare not repeat. It would be a shame even to speak those things, which these men glory in proclaiming openly to the world ; which they utter in the streets, and Courts of Justice, and by which they have insulted the Judges of the land, and would pollute the purity of the female breast. To talk of the “ impure morals of the Bible Deity,” and to pronounce the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a God of “ cruelty, injustice, deceit, fraud and the worst of human vices,”—such is a specimen of the impieties which they have dared to familiarize to the ears of a Christian people : and as the servant is not greater than his Lord, we cannot wonder, after this, to find them accusing the purest and holiest of God’s saints as guilty of iniquities at which nature shudders, and which morality refuses to name. I speak not unadvisedly on this subject. They have been painful hours which I have given to the examination of such writings ; but I have given my hours to the task, because it was my duty to do so : and, (thank God and his protecting grace) the issue has been a conviction of nothing but the desperation of those minds, the corruption of those tastes, and the pitiable ungodliness of those hearts which could dare to be so light and lustful in a matter of such un-

speakable solemnity. Be it true, or be it false, revelation is always serious itself, and has consequently a right to demand seriousness from others: and it is a mark either of an unsound head or an insincere heart to meet it in the spirit of railing and of ribaldry. Not only however do these enemies of the truth revile and speak all manner of evil falsely against the Gospel, but one of their basest and principal efforts is, to pour their calumnies into minds too weak to resist or refute them, and to clothe them in such a fascinating garb, as may captivate the imagination and disturb the impartiality of the reasoning powers. It is to the daughters of our Israel that some specially recommend their impiety and impurity. It is in a form and language which may be level to the means and capacities of the less educated part of the community, that others utter forth their notes of defiance against the God of Israel and his saints: and it is with the charms of poetic numbers, and in all the glowing colours of poetic imagery that one master spirit has sought to insinuate the poison of doubt and distrust with regard to the mercy and the holiness of David's Lord. Where are the marks of truth or of justice in all this? If men wished to beguile, and deceive, and corrupt, this is the very mode they would pursue. If men wished to turn away the thoughts of their hearers and their readers from the real merits of the ques-

tion, and set the passions in array against religion, and “make the worse appear the better reason,” this is the very course which subtlety would tempt them to adopt. Yet suspicious as their proceedings are, I presume not positively to say, how much of ignorance, or insincerity, or unmingled and unmitigated hatred to godliness is in these mens’ thoughts. There is one who knoweth, and will judge them in the day of his wrath. Neither know I to what degree of hardness they have grown, nor whether it be yet possible that their consciences may hereafter be stricken with a due sense of the horrible thing they are attempting to work among God’s people. But, if it be possible that they should hereafter look upon their present attempts to overthrow the faith of thousands, in that light in which they are now viewed by every Christian of real piety, nay even by every friend of sound morality, it would require a pen more powerful than the best of them can boast, a conception more sublime, and expressions more energetic than the noblest of their leaders owns, to estimate the load of unavailing and irremediable regret which will weigh down their minds in the day of their penitence, and hasten their gray hairs into a sorrowful grave. There is something in the nature of intellectual and literary iniquity which makes it impossible to obviate its dreadful effects. If I oppress the weak by my power, by my power I can again repay

him for his sufferings. If by dishonesty I rise to wealth, I can obliterate by liberality, when I repent, the greater part of the evil consequences of the wrong I have done. But the characters of impiety or impurity which my hand has once traced and sent forth into the world, no tears can wash out, no penitence can recal. Like Pilate, what the unbeliever "has written, he has written," and he cannot, if he would, either undo the deed, or frustrate its effects. The Spirit of the Lord may come upon the Infidel writer, and bring his heart into a great and godly sorrow for his sin. He may weep in holy penitence over his past unbelief, and through a renewal of faith be made again a partaker of the graces of redemption and sanctification unto his own eternal glory. But all his hope and assurance of salvation for his own soul in the world to come, will never be able to take away the fearful forebodings he must entertain of the incalculable evil which his sceptical and ungodly writings may have inflicted upon the souls of others in the world that now is. Let the man of genius who has perverted his talents be never so repentant for the abuse of his powers, and never so certain of having his pardon sealed to him through the blood of Jesus, still he will feel, and feel wretched when he thinks, that he has been guilty of a crime beyond his abilities to repair. That is, a worm which can never die. For the

invention of printing has given such strength, and swiftness, and stability to the thoughts and words of mankind, that when once our opinions have been subjected to the operations of the press, they are withdrawn for ever from our grasp, and will work the work for which they were originally sent forth, in defiance of all our efforts to blot them out. Nay our very efforts to recal the writings we have condemned will but, in many instances, have a tendency to increase their circulation, by more effectually stimulating the passions of the corrupt, the interests of trade, and the curiosity of the inquisitive, to preserve and study what the author seems so anxious to destroy. Whatever then may be the views with which these unbelieving and ungodly writers have promulgated their rebukes and blasphemies against the religion of the Son of God, whether they be deceiving or only deceived, they have done an evil which no subsequent exertions of their pen or their penitence can ever obliterate. Their souls, it is possible, may yet, if they repent and turn to the Lord in faith, be saved ; but it is impossible, even if their souls be saved, that their consciences should not through life be irremediably grieved by the melancholy reflection that they have been preparing a mental poison for which their feebleness can administer no certain antidote, and mingling a cup of bitterness for generations yet unborn. In that

conviction they must die. By the anguish of that reflection must their last hours be embittered, and they must quit the earth and its inhabitants conscious that they have sown the seeds of infidelity, and eternal death, in many an unwary and unstable soul.

Father of Mercies, save *us* from this woe, and teach us ever to speak and to write such things only as may be pleasing in thy sight, and profitable to thy people! Great Lord of Light and Life, thou that art the author and the giver of all wisdom, take away, we beseech thee, the darkness of our minds; enlighten and enliven us with the knowledge of thy truth, and guide our pens, that they err not against the holiness of thy law! And thou, the Eternal Spirit of the Father and the Son, thou that art the ruler and the sanctifier of the heart, cleanse us from all filthiness, both of flesh and of spirit, quench in us the lust of curiosity and praise, “increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy” so govern and direct the works of our understandings, that through them may be ascribed unto the Father, unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, all power, might, majesty, dominion, and praise, now, henceforth, and for evermore! *Amen.*

LECTURES V. AND VI.

 ERRORS TO BE AVOIDED IN EXPLAINING
 SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

JEREM. VIII. 9.

“Lo, they have rejected the word of the Lord, and what wisdom is in them?”

FROM pen to pen, and from age to age, has the same unvaried tone of censure been assumed, with more or less violence, by the Deist, and the same wearisome round of objections been repeated in condemnation of the contents of the Bible: and from pen to pen, and from age to age, have the same answers and arguments been urged by the friends of revelation, with more or less of propriety and vigour, in its support. But, as yet, neither party has confessed itself in the wrong, and both accuse their opponents of having failed in their undertaking. The Christian regards the uniform character of the objections urged by the Deist as implying only his presumptuous obstinacy against the truth. The Deist, in return, despises the sameness of the Theologian's arguments as a proof of the weakness of his cause,

and the palpable inconclusiveness of his defence ; and to such a fearful height has the presumption of unbelievers now grown, that, as I remarked in the conclusion of my last Discourse, they have taken a tone of the most positive and abusive disrespect, and almost refuse any longer to be confined within the regulations of legitimate reasoning, choosing rather to defy than to dispute with the God of Israel, and to appeal to the passions rather than the understandings of mankind. This could scarcely have occurred had the reasonings of both the Deist and the Christian, been raised upon the same common foundation. This could not but happen where, as is actually the case, they have drawn their conclusions from premises essentially different from each other. For unless the combatants in a logical dispute build upon the same common axioms, and admit the same fundamental propositions, they can neither understand each other's statements, nor appreciate each other's sentiments ; and so confusion, inconsistency, misapprehension, and strife for ever, must be the necessary result. To ascertain, therefore, those essential principles upon which our endeavours to elucidate the difficulties of Scripture ought uniformly to proceed, it will be expedient not merely to lay down a few arbitrary directions upon the subject ; but also to point out, in a clear and satisfactory manner, wherein

the difference between us and our adversaries consists. To this end it must be our aim first, to investigate and correct the errors into which Deistical writers have fallen ; and next, to deduce and defend the proper and necessary rules to be observed in the interpretation of “things hard to be understood:” for by no other means can we hope to reason successfully for the conviction of those whose mistakes or prejudices have led them to take an erroneous bias against the difficulties and mysteries of revelation.

I. Now the contents of any work may, it is clear, be considered and interpreted on two different suppositions. They may be interpreted either with or without regard to the nature and purposes of the work itself, and its mode and place and period of composition. Nor is this an unnecessary or an unimportant distinction. It is one which will in many instances have a material influence upon our conclusions. For instance, if we regard the *Eneid* of Virgil, or the *Commentaries* of Cæsar, without any reference to their author, their country, or their age, a great proportion of their pages will still no doubt, be found intelligible and explicable upon the mere common principles of grammar or of criticism ; but there will, at the same time, be many “things hard to be understood,” which, without such a

reference will seem absurd or objectionable in a high degree. Hence, it is plain, that the character which really belongs to a work, ought always to be taken into the account whenever we are endeavouring to defend it from objections founded on its difficulties. For difficulties can be applied as objections against any work, only as forming an objection to its internal credibility ; that is, as proving some inconsistency between what it is, and what it ought to have been, considering the circumstances of the case. Thus obscurities, which could only be removed by supposing them to contain an allusion to some Mahometan custom or opinion, would form a solid objection to a work known to have been written before, but none at all to one known to have been written after the death of Mahomet. For in the latter case the difficulty would, whilst in the former case it would not be such as it ought to have been, under the circumstances of the case.

But not only are we bound, when elucidating the difficulties of a work, to take into our account the character which is allowed on all hands to be its real character, and the circumstances under which it is known to have been indisputably composed ; but we are also required to consider the character which it *assumes* to belong to itself, and the circumstances under which it

pretends, to have been composed. These claims of the work itself in its own behalf, whether true or false, form an essential portion of that evidence by which, whenever its internal credibility is called in question, in consequence of its difficulties, it both demands and has a right to be tried. For, suppose a Missionary were to appear upon our native shores, professing himself to be an Arabian by birth, and deputed for the purpose of promulgating the religion of his country to this distant isle. The declarations of such an individual might be altogether or partially false; but, so far as the internal credibility of the Missionary's tale was concerned, the only thing we should ever think of examining would be this, whether his language bore the marks of his pretended origin, and whether what he said and did was consistent with a supposed teacher of the faith and doctrines of the Koran. Never should we think of considering it as any objection to his claims that his phraseology would have been absurd in the mouth of an European, or that his doctrines were inconsistent with the principles of the Gospel, because as he never pretended either to be an European in language, or to teach the principles of the Gospel, all objections upon such points would be altogether irrelevant. Such is the manner in which we should proceed in our judgement upon the pre-

tensions of any human being, and such, consequently, is the rule which should be applied in our judgement upon the pretensions of any human composition. For a written composition is but another mode by which its author, be he who he may, sets before us the character in which he wishes to be considered, and the principles it is his intention to teach. So far, therefore, as the internal evidence of a work being what it pretends to be, is to be drawn from the nature of its contents, it is sufficient that those contents be in consistency with its professions; nor can it be deemed any effectual objection to its internal credibility that it is found to possess difficulties which, though in a work of a different nature they would have been incongruous and inexplicable, are perfectly natural and capable of solution in such a one as that, in which they actually appear, represents itself to be. In a word, we must always take into our account the Bible's own statements with regard to its nature and purposes, whenever we are attempting to explain and illustrate its contents.

Clear however and satisfactory as this general conclusion would appear to be, its application to the Scriptures has been violated or neglected in almost innumerable instances. Nothing is more

common than to hear men reasoning, and objecting to the difficulties of the Bible, as if it were a matter of no consequence at all whether they did or did not take into consideration the character it assumes to itself. The modifications of this fault are various ; but the following appear to be its principal and most pernicious forms.

1. It is an extremely general error for the objectors to the Bible to form their judgement upon its contents as if it professed to be nothing more than a common and uninspired historical, or moral, or philosophical work. How often, for instance, are the narratives of Moses and of Joshua compared with the histories of Livy and of Herodotus, and the miracles of the former maintained to be false, because the prodigies of the latter are acknowledged to be incredible? How often, again, are the writings of Ezekiel and Æschylus compared, and the irregular flights, the violent transitions, the hyperbolical expressions, and supernatural images of the prophet condemned as extravagant and unmeaning, because in the poet they would have been universally allowed to be incoherent and absurd? In the same manner, too, and with quite as much boldness, are the doctrines of Christ and his Apostles estimated, as if they were nothing more than

the doctrines of Plato or of Socrates, and then held to be inadmissible on the simple authority of these divine teachers, because they could not have been established by the mere word of those human philosophers. But nothing can be more fallacious or inapplicable than such a process of reasoning. The Bible, as we have already remarked, distinctly claims to be something different from every ordinary production of poets, historians, and philosophers. Positively and universally does it represent itself as being "given by inspiration of God," that God, whose "ways are not as our ways, and whose thoughts are not as our thoughts^a." "*All Scripture*," says St. Paul, is so given. All Scripture, therefore, is absolutely to be considered in this light, whenever its difficulties are examined with a reference to the justice of its pretensions to that character. Claiming to be the word of God it exempts itself, so far as the internal evidence of its being such is concerned, from the application of every rule and the force of every objection which could be used with propriety only against the word of man. What may be the precise nature and extent of the difference we should observe in our judgement upon the difficulties of that which professes to be the word of God, and that which professes only to be the word of man, it is not

^a Isai. lv. 8.

my present intention to determine. It must depend much upon circumstances, and will vary in almost every case. But this I maintain, that, first, to take it for granted that there exists no difference between the Bible and any other work, and then to deem every thing objectionable in the Bible which would have been objectionable in any other work, is a great and fundamental error. The Bible may not be inspired, though it declares itself so to be ; but those difficulties which may be accounted for on the supposition of its inspiration, cannot be esteemed as in any manner detracting from the justice of its claims to that quality.

2. Another error of equal frequency and magnitude is the habit of forming a judgement upon insulated portions of the Bible, without taking into consideration their connection with each other and the whole. “ Known unto God,” say the Scriptures themselves, whilst they claim to have been given from God, “ are all his works from the beginning of the world^a.” It cannot, therefore, but be productive of great inconvenience and most incorrect views, to interpret those works, as if proceeding from a short-sighted man without any intention of arrangement, and incapable of combining or foreseeing the opera-

^a Acts xv. 18.

tions of a variety of causes in a long and intricate plan. It is, in fact, an error precisely analogous to that of those Critical Commentators who would expound or condemn a passage without any reference to the context. “Whosoever hath,” saith our Saviour^b, “to him shall be given, and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.” The construction of this sentence is peculiar, and the words so singularly selected, that, when examined alone and without respect to the occasion and purpose for which they were uttered, it would require but little ingenuity to prove the former part of the assertion they contain to be unjust, and the latter impossible. To give to him that hath, might easily be shewn to be a most strange and improper rule of beneficence; and to take from him that hath not is, no doubt, when literally interpreted, beyond the reach of any conceivable power. But the honour of such meagre criticism as this, if any one were weak enough to make it, would be found most imaginary and brief, and all the triumph of its verbal sophistry would vanish at the touch of truth, and become as an idle tale when once the real meaning and intention of the declaration had been discovered by a reference to the rules of sound and genuine interpretation. It is with equal

^b Matt. xiii. 12.

ease that the offering of Isaac, and the loss and restoration of Jonah may be ridiculed and condemned, if examined only as unconnected incidents. But when viewed in the relation which the Bible represents them to have borne to the great system of which they form a part;—when viewed as typical of the death and resurrection of the Messiah, who was the end of every ordinance and event in the law,—it is, at least, possible that they may assume an aspect of importance and dignity which would put to silence, for ever, the rebukes and ridicule of the scorner. Most inconclusive, therefore, is the reasoning, most unwarranted the sentence which, before they have been estimated in this connection with a system, and this reference to an end, would turn them into a mark of the internal incredibility of the work in which they appear. Thus the wheel which is the medium of communicating motion to a vast combination of mechanical powers, and which, whilst we are unacquainted with the machinery to which it belongs, seems so idly to pursue its everlasting round, is immediately raised in our apprehensions when we come to consider it in the character of a moving force. The consciousness of its necessity then turns our astonishment into approbation, and the perception of its utility and power makes its determined but unavailing resistance to the stream

in which it is placed, and its ceaseless, but hitherto inexplicable turnings, a source of admiration and a theme of praise. Let the same equitable measure of judgement be dealt out also to the great combination of moral powers which professes to have been fore-ordained before the foundation of the world for the redemption and amelioration of mankind: let each incident, and doctrine, and individual, and ordinance, and prediction in the Bible be viewed as it tends to the furtherance of the whole body of the pre-established plan, and then we may have some hope of judging justly of its difficulties, and, if we censure at all, of censuring wisely and with understanding.

3. Very nearly allied to the fault of altogether separating the parts of a system from their connection with the whole, is the habit of giving a false, or imperfect view of that connection, which they claim, and then forming our conclusions as if we had reasoned upon an entire and correct statement of the case.

To take an *inadequate* estimate of the end and purpose of any action, and to argue upon its propriety or impropriety before the relation in which it stands to all the surrounding incidents, has been completely developed, is a course of proceeding

which cannot but lead to the most detrimental mistakes. For the conclusion we have drawn, though perfectly consistent with the premises upon which it is built, may, in reality, require an entirely new modification, when the circumstances we have omitted have been added to the account. The premises being altered, will necessarily demand a proportional alteration in the inference. Thus if we conceive the only object of the Transfiguration of our Lord to have been that of giving an extraordinary proof of his divine mission, we have conceived but half the truth; and forgetting some of the less evident, but more especial uses of the miracle, must be at a loss to assign any reasonable ground for its peculiar and characteristic features. If we imagine the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage to have been the only motive for the awful dealings of the Almighty with the sovereign, and his wonderful and repeated severities upon the inhabitants of Egypt, we shall have formed an idea, true enough in part, but yet so inadequate and incomplete as to leave some of the most important circumstances incapable of any sound interpretation, or rational defence. It is only when we investigate the glory of the Transfiguration in connection with the sufferings of the Messiah, the fulfilment of the prophecies, and the completion and abolition of the law, as well as in its bearings upon the truth of the pretensions of

Jesus, that we begin to appreciate and understand its wonders. It is only when we consider the Lord God of Israel as working for the conversion of his enemies, as well as the deliverance of his people, and as labouring to impress a sense of his power and majesty upon those who had fallen into the follies of Idolatry, as well as to confirm those who had adopted, but were still wavering in the worship of the true and only Potentate ;—it is only when we combine these, and perhaps a variety of other ends which the plagues of Egypt, and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart were both intended and calculated to produce, that we begin truly to estimate the wisdom of such weighty woes, and are enabled satisfactorily to vindicate the means employed for the salvation of Israel.

It is an evil however of still more dangerous tendency, to assign a *false*, instead of an inadequate motive for the proceedings of the Almighty. To reason upon the contents of the Bible, and judge of the doctrines, the precepts, the miracles, or the statements of revelation, by rules which are founded upon suppositions contrary to those it lays down for itself, must be still more fatal to the correctness of our conclusions, than to condemn it upon an imperfect representation of its motives, however far that representation may fall short of the truth. Yet it is thus that sentence has been

pronounced against many of the most important portions of the Old and New Testaments. The righteousness and merits of the Israelites are assumed as the real and only justifiable motives of their selection as God's peculiar people: and then, to shew the impropriety and injustice of the selection, their follies and their crimes, their murmurings and unbelief, are heaped together with a most anxious, but yet a most unavailing industry. "Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart dost thou go in to possess the land^a," is the warning of God himself unto his chosen race; and every framer of an argument, who denies the truth of the declaration, and assumes something to have been the motive for the transaction, which the Bible expressly renounces as its motive, may reason justly enough, according to his own view of the subject, but has no right whatever to condemn, by that reasoning, the book which takes a different view. If in our contemplation of a combination of mechanical powers, we choose perversely to maintain, in direct contradiction to the assertions of its Maker, that a wheel was intended to perform the office of a screw, we may legitimately triumph in the demonstration of the absurdity of such a substitution in the abstract; but there is no soundness whatever in the conclusions we may form against the

^a Deut. ix. 5.

skill or wisdom of the inventor, in this particular case. He meant no such substitution, and therefore he is liable to no such censure. Such, at least, is the statement we are supposed to gather from his own mouth. Out of his own mouth, therefore, at least, he can never be justly blamed for the fault or folly of making a choice which his own mouth denies that he has ever made. It is the same with the incidents, the doctrines, the precepts, and every other portion of the internal fabric of the book of revelation. The internal consistency of the parts with each other, and their operation in the production of the intended result must be estimated according to the Bible's own declaration of the manner in which it designed they should be connected together, and the purpose their connection was proposed to answer. So long as we assign to them a connection which they renounce, and argue upon them as intended to effect some purpose they deny to have been contemplated, our objections can never be allowed to be of any real weight. Founded upon an erroneous hypothesis, they must be as unsound as the foundation upon which they rest.

The three errors which have now been pointed out, the error of regarding the Bible as merely a common and uninspired production of the human mind; and the error of forgetting the

mutual connection of its subordinate parts; and the error of misrepresenting or misunderstanding the true relation of those parts, as the members of a great and comprehensive plan, form only one class of those errors, of which sceptical and theological writers are guilty in endeavouring to defend or censure the difficulties of Scripture. They form only that class of mistakes which men commit by conceiving a wrong or imperfect notion of the nature of the subject to which their objections or illustrations are applied.

II. BUT there is also another set of errors which we are equally, if not still more liable to commit. However accurately our premises may be laid down, and however full and fair may be our view of the whole circumstances of the case, it is still possible that we may fail in deducing our inferences with correctness; or we may be wrong in the kind of principles upon which our judgment is formed; or we may err in the manner of applying our principles, though just, to each successive difficulty as it occurs. In that class of errors already examined and refuted, men are supposed to reason justly, but from an improper or inapplicable view of the state of the case. In that class which I am now to discuss, the state of the case is supposed to have been justly enough

conceived, but the conclusions are either drawn in an improper manner, or founded upon improper or inapplicable principles.

1. Upon the former of the points here alluded to, the improper manner of drawing our conclusions, even when founded upon proper premises and principles, I shall say nothing; because nothing peculiar or exclusively applicable to the Scriptures can be said. In matters of revelation and of grace, the same errors are liable to be incurred on this point, as in matters of nature, of literature and of science; and, therefore, the common logical rules, which it would be both unnecessary and impertinent to specify, will suffice for the regulation of our reasoning in both.

2. But upon the other point, that is, the principles upon which our judgement with respect to the difficulties of Holy Writ should be formed, one most fatal and presumptuous fault seems so generally to prevail, as to make it criminal to be silent. It is the custom of bringing every thing in the Bible to the test of certain pre-conceived and arbitrary theories of our own. In the progress of education, of society, and of life, men almost universally imbibe from their intercourse with each other, or deduce from an independent contemplation of the works of nature for themselves, a systematic series of opinions upon

all the various subjects of physical, metaphysical, and of moral science. To these they appeal as fundamental principles. To these they adhere with the pertinacity of early love ; and to the authority of these they bow down with reverence in every debate, as the only indisputable laws of reasoning, and the only sure guides of truth. Yet, after all, these systems are but the theories of fallible men, creations which being born and in honour to day may, like their creators and their predecessors, be dead and loathed, or forgotten before to-morrow. Such, however, be they what they may, are the standards by which the propriety of the contents of revelation in all their manifold variety are almost universally tried by sceptical writers. A delineation of Natural Religion is formed by one ; and the whole system is compacted and completed by another. The infinite attributes of the incomprehensible God then become the subjects of propositions and inferences as positive and as distinct as if they related merely to the operations of some tangible, and measurable, and mechanical power. Thus moulded into form the scheme captivates by its simplicity, and, flattering at once the pride and indolence of the mind, is accepted as a safe and certain law, and applied with all the fearlessness of ignorance to the doctrines of atonement, predestination and grace. No one asks, “ Who hath

known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been his counsellor^a?" No one doubts the absolute and unalterable certainty of what he has learnt, and consequently never dreams of the possibility of its being necessary for him to go and learn again. Thus is it in doctrine; and in morals it is the same. To love our enemy, is said to encourage enmity. To do good to those that hate us, is supposed to hold forth a premium to malevolence; and to "submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake^b," is imagined to level into one common mass the merits of a just and the iniquities of an oppressive government. But, say our wise objectors, to encourage strife, to give a premium to malevolence, and to make no difference between a just and an oppressive government, is manifestly irrational, because manifestly inconsistent with the welfare of society. Thus they reason, and thus they conclude about the precepts of the Bible; and the whole matter is then settled in the simplest and easiest of all possible propositions. Revelation, they allege, cannot be true, because its ethical principles are repugnant to the results of their philosophical investigations into the eternal fitness of things! Natural Philosophy might seem, as being deduced from experience and experiment, to be incapable of being thus tortured into an enemy of

^a Rom. xi. 34.

^b 1 Pet. ii. 13.

Scripture ; but even this experimental science will be found in all ages to have fallen into the same unhappy fate. The Natural Philosopher walks forth to contemplate the majestic scenery of nature with a systematic eye, to disturb the silence of her solitudes with the sound of his hammer, and gather the materials of his geological theory from a few petty fragments broken off from the masses of her stupendous mountains. The theory is formed, admired, admitted, and then applied as a criterion of truth to the statements of the sacred writers. An apparent discrepancy is detected, and doubt or censure is immediately thrown upon the Bible, or its transcribers, or its expositors, or any thing or any person, rather than the system or its framer. Yet why should we wonder that the conclusions deduced only from the consideration of a meagre cabinet of insignificant specimens should seem to differ from that account in the Bible which refers to, and comprehends the mighty whole? There is nothing singular in all this ; nothing more singular than that we should be ignorant or mistaken with regard to the internal plan and arrangement of a temple whose outward structure alone we had an opportunity to behold. Yet upon such imperfect knowledge is the Bible condemned, and by such fallacious reasonings the unbeliever boasts the glory of a fancied triumph.

Such are a few instances of the fault to which I allude. I object not, it would be most unwise to object, to the discreet study of any branch of science, or to the legitimate application of its principles to any portion of the contents of the sacred Volume. We can never know too much, nor ever think and enquire too much, into the truth of the religion we profess. Examine it in all its bearings, try its difficulties by every principle; but when your theories and the Bible disagree, be pleased to remember the fleeting, unsubstantial nature of all human fabrics, whether material or intellectual, and think how foolish has proved the wisdom of some of the most favoured systems of imagination and ingenuity. Consider, therefore, most seriously with yourselves upon every such occasion, whether it be not possible, at least, that not the Bible but your own theories are false. Never condemn the Scriptures on account of their inconsistency with received opinions, until it has been shewn beyond the power of dispute that those opinions partake of the nature and perpetuity of truth, and are, like the God of truth himself, eternal and immutably fixed.

Nor is this caution requisite only for those who would turn the difficulties of revelation into an objection to its authenticity or authority. It is

equally necessary for those who would explain, account for, or defend them. As much harm has been done, and as much error propagated by the endeavours of Theologians to meet the unbeliever on his own ground, and by attempts to elucidate "things hard to be understood" upon the principles of reigning theories, as by the efforts of objectors themselves to darken the counsels of Heaven, and pervert the simplicity of godliness by philosophic subtleties. However plausible those solutions which are founded upon such sophistry may appear at first, yet as soon as the theories cease to be in vogue upon which they are raised, the solutions themselves will share in the fall of that which supported them, and additional doubt and distrust follow of course. Are the principles of my philosophy true? Though true, are they applicable to the present case? Though applicable, are they applicable in an unlimited sense? and, if not, what are the restrictions to be observed in the manner and extent of their application? These are preliminary and essential points, and if any material mistake exist in these, we can never with confidence rely upon the conclusions we draw, whether against or in favour of revelation.

I have now pointed out several errors which appear to have vitiated the reasonings of those

numerous writers who at various times and with various intentions have endeavoured to turn the obscurities and difficulties of the Scriptures into an objection to their genuineness, authority or truth. Not that these errors are always, if at all, enunciated by the Sceptic himself as the principles upon which his conclusions against revelation are raised. The claims of the Bible to be an extraordinary communication from Heaven are rather forgotten than denied. The existence and nature of its plan for the redemption and restoration of mankind, and the intimate and mutual connection of its subordinate parts, are facts which are rather overlooked than disproved ; whilst the application of human theories of morals and human systems of philosophy to those precepts and doctrines and dispensations which profess to be divine, is a mode of reasoning, the propriety of which is rather tacitly assumed than either positively asserted or argumentatively maintained. What arguments indeed could support, or what defence be urged in favour of propositions so manifestly inapplicable ? Their refutation is implied almost in the very terms of their statement, and the illustration, rather than the demonstration, of their absurdity is that upon which we have found it most expedient to insist. It is silently, therefore, and not openly, that the conclusions of the unbeliever are in general founded

upon such fallacious premises. Deceiving or deceived, he insinuates, without asserting, the untenable principles upon which his opinions are grounded, and thus gradually and perhaps unconsciously, but not the less certainly, are his own and his followers' faith in the truth and divine origin of Christianity either weakened or destroyed. Had he made an open declaration of his untenable or inapplicable propositions, they would, if clearly and altogether false, have at once startled the understanding and awakened the judgement both of the reasoner and the reader: and even if the propriety of the propositions or their application had been only doubtful, their doubtfulness would still have been sufficient to break the slumbers of reflection; to call forth the reasoning faculties into activity, and, by leading to the examination have led also to a renunciation of what was wrong, an hesitation upon what was ambiguous, and an acceptance only of what was really and universally right and useful. But as it is, the only thing which a writer against the difficulties of revelation perceives is this; that his conclusions follow regularly from his premises, and that his premises are *generally* true. How irrelevant they are to the present subject of his investigation, and how immaterial is their general truth if they be not strictly applicable to the Scriptures in particular, he never

stops to consider. Borne on by the spirit of delusion he forgets the cautious treadings of his forefathers, and elevated by the visionary and incongruous images which too deep a draught of the intoxicating streams of mere human learning have raised, he resolves, against warning, against reason, and against God, to push his adventurous steps into intellectual regions too high and too barren to stimulate the exertions or the hopes of more sober minds. He tries his strength against the Scriptures of truth, and wielding his unsanctified weapons in a manner as unskilful as unholy, but wastes his vigour and displays his weakness. Would to God that the contemplation of his errors would teach us, who attempt to justify the words of revelation to man, to avoid the evils to which such presumption leads, and instruct us in the wisdom of a learned modesty in all holy things! Would to God that it might impress upon our consciences this most important conviction, that there are principles of religion to be settled in the head as well as of morality to be established in the heart—that the understanding as well as the affections are to be regulated and reformed, and that we have not only to practise righteousness towards our brethren, but humility towards our Maker! It is for this, as well as to be a guard to us in our interpretation of Scripture, that I have been so anxious in

pointing out these grievous errors in the management of our enquiries into “things hard to be understood;” and most earnestly and most repeatedly would I impress upon your thoughts, as one of the best and most important lessons the mind can learn from its lucubrations, that we are not more imperatively required to do justice and love mercy with man, than to reason humbly when we reason with our God.



LECTURE VII.

RULES TO BE OBSERVED IN EXPLAINING
SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

1 COR. II. 13.

“Comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”

THERE is a two-fold benefit to be derived from the consideration of those errors which have been committed by such as have preceded us in the same or a similar pursuit. The first and more immediate advantage is that of instructing us in the dangers to which we are exposed, and inspiring us with a cautious diligence to avoid the injudicious course of our predecessors. A second and more indirect, but not less beneficial result, is that of teaching us to deduce the proper laws of reasoning from the consideration of our adversaries, or our forerunners' faults. The former of these lessons it was my endeavour to impress and improve in the conclusion of my last Discourse. The rules which the errors, then specified and

condemned, suggest as the positive rules to be followed in the elucidation of Scripture Difficulties, remain yet to be enumerated. It is an enumeration, however, which will require neither much labour to frame, nor many pages to detail.

1. If it be an error to regard the Bible as professing to be nothing different from any common philosophical or historical work, it is of course our primary duty to consider, and to consider carefully and constantly, that difference which it states to subsist between itself and every other philosophical or historical work. In every case, therefore, where the internal credibility of the contents of the Jewish and Christian revelations is to be maintained, our first law of reasoning must be that of arguing upon their difficulties, as the difficulties of a work professing to have been composed by men acting under the influence of divine inspiration, and commissioned from heaven to record their deeds and their doctrines for the instruction of mankind. In other words, the first rule to be observed in the elucidation of Scripture Difficulties is to examine them as if they were the difficulties of a divine revelation.

2. If again it be an error of a most perilous import to look upon the different portions of the Bible as the unconnected productions of a set of

insulated beings, which chance alone has formed into a distinct volume, it must be a duty of equal necessity and importance, to view each page, however distant the date of its composition, however dissimilar in the general character of its contents, and however different the author and circumstances to which it owes its origin, as having a decided and intentional reference to the same subject, and the same end with every other page, and with the whole. We must consider every incident, every sentence, and almost every word, as the subordinate parts of a preconceived and mighty plan, beginning with the creation, and comprehending the entire period of the duration of the world: and all the light which what has gone before can throw upon what follows, and what follows can throw upon what has gone before, may be freely borrowed for the purposes of illustration and defence. The second rule, therefore, is this; to regard the Scriptures as a system from beginning to end, and to interpret their different books and pages as the component and connected parts of that system.

3. If, thirdly, it be an error most disgraceful to an upright reasoner to give a false, and most unpardonable in a careful enquirer, to give an imperfect view of the design and connection of the successive portions of an extensive plan, there

rests a proportional obligation upon every honest and industrious theologian, to search impartially to discover the true, and to search diligently till he has discovered the complete motive and tendency of every obscurity, of every difficulty, and of every passage which appears either dubious or inconsistent in the Holy Scriptures. It is a third, therefore, and a most essential rule, to interpret the contents of the Bible in their true connection, in the whole of their connection, and in nothing but their connection with the system they profess to contain.

4. But the great error is that of judging the Bible upon improper or inapplicable principles, and presumptuously concluding every thing to be inconsistent with moral, or philosophical, or religious truth, which happens to be inconsistent with our moral, or philosophical, or religious theories. The great duty, therefore, to which, in consequence of that error, we are called, and the great law we have to follow in all that we venture, either to think or say upon the mysteries and difficulties of revelation, is to conceive it both possible and probable, in some instances at least, that our preconceived opinions may be false, and that, consequently, it is equally possible and probable, that the condemnation we pass upon the Scriptures, when measured by such a doubtful and

variable criterion, may be altogether unjust. We must think the writers of revelation as capable of forming a correct notion of the proceedings and attributes, and intentions of the Deity as ourselves, and never censure their moral, or ridicule their doctrinal and philosophical statements without the strictest investigation, and merely because they differ from our own. We must read the writings of the Prophets and Apostles with patience, examine them with impartiality, and correct, where it is necessary, our own views by theirs. Thus only can we hope to arrive at a full and accurate knowledge of the principles by which Scripture may be safely judged. We should remember too, that to acquire such a knowledge, requires something superior to learning, and even impartiality of mind. It asks of us humility,—the last and most arduous of all intellectual attainments; a lowliness of spirit, and a modesty of thought, esteeming the judgement of the sacred writers as equal, if not better than our own, upon all matters directly belonging to the revelation of the Mosaic Law, and the purposes and proofs of Christianity, as dependant upon that previous and preparatory dispensation. It demands our acquiescence in their opinion, in that degree in which their inspiration is probable or proved, and a submission to authority wherever authority can be fairly presumed, or shewn to exist. In a word, a fourth, and perhaps the most

important rule of all, is to distrust the absolute certainty of mere human philosophy, to doubt the accuracy of mere logical reasoning, when applied to subjects beyond the reach of experience and sight, and never to regard the fleeting, and perhaps erroneous, theories of the schools and the day, as any infallible criterion of the doctrines of a divine revelation.

5. The preceding rules are such as relate only to the subject matter of Scripture Difficulties. The manner in which that subject matter is expressed, the words and phrases, as well as "things hard to be understood," still demand our attention, and the laws of interpretation, by which they are to be explained, still require to be discussed. But as the full consideration of this point would lead me far beyond any reasonable limits, and would embrace almost the whole range of expository theology, I must content myself with referring to one particular error into which both believers and unbelievers have fallen.

The error, then, to which I allude, is that of subjecting the language of the Bible to the same narrow regulations, and expounding it upon the same restricted basis as the language of any other book. But if the doctrines and incidents recorded by the Prophets of the Lord are to be judged

on a more extended scale than those of ordinary men, surely their expressions also are to be measured by a more comprehensive and spiritual rule. Not that the common rules of criticism are to be omitted, but modified and enlarged to meet the peculiarities of the sacred writings. For it cannot be denied that the Holy Scriptures have many features in common with the rest of human productions. They were written by men, the difference of whose style and the bent of whose genius may be traced through every page in the varieties of their phraseology, the form of their sentences, and the general character of their composition. They are also written not only in the language of men, but in such language as was in use in the period and countries in which they appeared, and they consequently display the same local and national peculiarities with other contemporary works. This is a plain indication that in these respects they are to be tried by laws applicable to all similar works. But though thus far the Scriptures are like, and, therefore, to be interpreted like other writings, yet they are in part also unlike all other writings, and, therefore, subject to a different estimate. For though the Prophets and Apostles have certainly delivered their sentiments in the ordinary speech of their time and country, yet there are occasions when they unequivocally profess that they speak the things

which "God had revealed unto them by his Spirit, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth^a." Hence, "as the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God," and dictated the volume of Holy Writ for the instruction of every succeeding age, it is highly probable that many passages may appear much more worthy of being revealed by God, when considered with a view to the sense in which they would be taken in succeeding ages, and a more advanced state of religious knowledge, than when only literally interpreted and confined in their application, as we should confine the words of a mere human author, to the circumstances of the individuals to whom they were immediately addressed. It is most undoubtedly conceivable, that declarations which, when only literally interpreted, and explained only with a reference to the context and occasion upon which they were originally spoken, seem comparatively insignificant and jejune, may become far more capable of vindication, and far less difficult to comprehend, when spiritually understood, and with a reference to the faults or edification of some future period of the Church. The original occasion should indeed never be forgotten, nor the original context violated. But if, in addition to the primary sense of a difficult passage, we can ascertain also

^a 1 Cor. ii. 10, 13.

the further mind of the Holy Ghost; and if that mind of the Holy Ghost will give a more satisfactory elucidation than the mere primary sense alone could yield, we are not only authorised, but bound to take it into our account. Undoubtedly we are also bound to be cautious in assigning any ulterior object to the words of the sacred writers, and there is certainly some danger of abusing the privilege. Still, however, I conceive that secondary or co-ordinate senses are not on that account to be renounced, or to be regarded as inadmissible, either in a divine or human composition. For who has ever either written much himself, or read much of the writings of others, without being aware that words, which are capable of a two-fold meaning, are sometimes purposely introduced, and sometimes purposely placed in an order in which they are capable of a two-fold interpretation. This, human authors do, either, like the oracles of old, from a desire of leaving their decision upon some important matter altogether in doubt, or for the more honest purpose of conciliating the reader upon those subjects in which it is possible that a difference of opinion may innocently subsist. The Holy Scriptures can do it with no other view than that of more effectually answering their holy and important end of making “whatsoever was written aforetime for our learning,” to be profitable, at all times for doctrine

and our instruction in righteousness : and if the spiritual exposition which, in conformity with this intention of the Bible, we give to any particular passage, be at once just and useful, we are surely justified in having recourse to it for our defence. In what cases, or under what circumstances such a spiritual exposition may be considered just and useful, I have no time at present to determine, though I trust at some future opportunity to state the regulations under which the principle is admissible. I would now merely maintain, that as the eternal and all-seing Spirit was the guide and superintendent, if not the universal suggester of the sacred penmen in their literary task, it is somewhat presumptuous to confine their productions to the same limited meaning, and to chain them down by the same meagre rules, which are applied to the interpretation of the works of a mere human writer, who, from the very constitution of his nature, is incapable of expatiating in his thoughts beyond the present hour, or adapting his expressions so as to meet the ever-varying exigencies and ideas of the world. Assuredly, the Spirit *could* look into the womb of futurity, and speak to beings that were not as though they already were. Assuredly, the Spirit *could* make such a verbal arrangement as might assimilate with the changes of situation and opinion in each succeeding age ; and where then is the wisdom

of expounding these words of inspiration as if they were the words only of some finite intelligence? I have dwelt the longer upon this subject, because I know that there are theologians even in modern times, who doubt or reject the rule I am endeavouring to establish, and maintain that no other laws are to be applied to the interpretation of the sacred writings, than such as are to be applied to any human composition. But I cannot persuade myself, for the sake of their authority, to give up either the reasons I have advanced, or the superior authority of two of the most illustrious ornaments of religion and science. St. Augustine positively states that “there is sufficient reason to believe, that the canonical writers foresaw all the truths which might be drawn from their words; and though they had not foreseen it, yet the Holy Ghost foresaw them.” Lord Bacon also asserts with great boldness, that “it greatly dishonours the Scriptures, and greatly injures the Church, to explain the inspired writings in the same manner as human writings are explained.” Upon these two names I prefer to rest, and in correspondence with their sentiments, would lay it down as a fifth general rule for the explanation of Scripture difficulties, that we should always make that difference between the interpretation of the language of the Bible and any other book, which the inspiration and

different object of the Bible require. Our method of exposition should be modified according to the character and author of the composition we expound.

6. The last rule I have to propose, as necessary to be observed in the consideration of "things hard to be understood," is rather of a cautionary than a preceptive nature. It consists in an earnest recommendation to every one engaged in the elucidation of the Bible, not even to attempt the explanation of every difficulty, but to leave some to be illustrated by those who are more deeply versed in the learning which that particular kind of difficulty requires; to leave others to be solved by the powerful agency of time and repeated investigations; and absolutely to leave many, not only as unexplained, but as inexplicable by the human faculties. The varied subjects of science and literature which revelation embraces, demand, as I have more than once remarked, a proportional variety of science and literature in its interpreters. It is, however, a variety so vast, that no single divine can ever hope to be thoroughly versed in every part. Of some branches he must be either totally or partially ignorant. Before he sits down to defend or condemn an obscurity, it is, therefore, his duty to ask himself whether he is sufficiently acquainted with the subject of debate,

to examine it in all its bearings ; and if he finds that he cannot, either from the stores of his own mind, or the recorded researches of others, bring together all the materials requisite to obviate the objections alleged, he should neither be disappointed with his failure, nor presume for a moment to insinuate a suspicion against what he does not fully understand. The sword which the arm of a child cannot raise, may be wielded with ease by the hand of a man. It is not the heaviness of the weapon, but the weakness of the agent that creates the difficulty. Nor is it from a conviction of his own individual ignorance alone that an inquirer should sometimes withdraw from the consideration of Scripture difficulties. If the subject be in its own nature beyond his sight and understanding ; if it relate solely to things eternal and infinite, whilst he himself is but finite and temporal ; or if it be such as to take in not only the present but other worlds, and other ranks of created beings in its operations ; then let him not only acquiesce in his want of power to perceive and defend its propriety, but let him studiously abstain from every attempt to investigate the secret purposes of the Almighty ; and let him give at least an hesitating assent to every pretended explanation of what, by the terms of the supposition, is allowed to be in some degree incomprehensible. In no cases have the folly and

danger of a violation of this law of modesty been more prominently set forth, than in the endless controversies upon the origin of evil, the scheme of redemption, and election through grace. In every one of these doctrines, there is evidently something which we are not fully acquainted with. Up to the point to which our faculties and observations reach, we can, as we think, satisfactorily justify the ways of God to man. But as soon as the matters in question begin to be connected with other portions of the universe, or to have a probable influence upon the condition of Angelic natures; as soon as they touch upon the extent to which the several properties of the Deity operate upon and regulate each other, or the mode in which his infinite attributes of foreknowledge and justice and wisdom are compounded together; as soon as they reach this point, we are inevitably lost in the boundless nature of subjects which, with our present capacities, we could not perhaps, under any circumstances, have been made to comprehend. In all questions like these, silence and submission are the things required, and we must be content with a partial estimate and view. We have only to ascertain the authority and meaning of the divine teacher who utters such things, and then acquiesce in his statements, as the statements of one speaking faithfully what he has either seen or heard from Heaven. Thus it is, that in all

the common affairs of life and government, we universally act and advise. If the general assertions of a teacher be found, upon all those subjects with which we are acquainted, to be true, and his opinions to be uniformly justified by those reasons which he has advanced and we can understand; we are bound also to give credit, proportionate to his authority, to all his assertions upon subjects we are not made acquainted with, and all his reasonings which from our ignorance we are unable to estimate. If the acts of a government when its motives are open to our inspection, are always found to be right, and if its motives, so far as we can perceive, are always laid open to our inspection when it is prudent to do so, we are bound to believe well of it also even when its motives are withheld. Such is the measure with which, in righteousness, we should judge both of human dispensations and divine. We should neither presume to explain every thing, nor murmur where we cannot.

The rules which I have thus ventured to lay down for the elucidation of the difficulties of Scripture have at least the recommendation of being readily remembered, and easily understood. Yet few and simple as they are, and essential as they would appear to be, it is melancholy to remark how seldom theologians have kept them steadily in

view, and how uniformly the objections of unbelievers are founded upon a violation of their leading principles. Why is it thus? Why do not only those who oppose the truth, but even those who in sincerity defend it, thus frequently deviate from the path which might have guided them to the light of revelation's day? Much of course is due to a natural weakness of capacity in some; much to pride, and the presumption of talent in others; and still more perhaps to a corruption of heart and life. But much also, I am inclined to think, is due to the want of an early instruction in religious things. Sound learning is not the only thing requisite to make a sound believer. There must also be a sound application of the learning we possess, and that application is neither the same, nor equally easy in every subject. In law, in medicine, and in history; in moral, in experimental, and in demonstrative sciences, there must be a modification of the general principles of reasoning adapted to the nature of each. That modification forces itself upon the most unwilling enquirer when he commences the study of any secular profession; and were religion a subject which men in general were compelled to consider with as much seriousness, and for as long a time as the business of their callings in the world, there would be far less danger in leaving it to their own unassisted good sense to vary the rules of inter-

pretation according to the exigencies of each theological case. But there is such a prevalent indisposition to the study of heavenly things ; and so many temptations to seduce men from the path of duty and of faith, after they have once entered into active life ; and so many employments to prevent their time from being devoted to the examination of the grounds of their religion, that the bias which education has given to the mind is perhaps more strongly and permanently felt in religion, than in any other pursuit. Above all things, therefore, it is requisite that the method of properly investigating religious truth should be early and carefully instilled into the student's mind : for if that essential part of culture be neglected in youth, great indeed is the fear of its never afterwards being acquired at all. If the mode of examining the difficulties of any common work or science be taught, but we are never taught the difference to be observed in transferring our rules of judgement from the objects of sight to those of faith, the result is obvious. We shall go forth confounding theology with philosophy, and expecting the application of the same means to produce the same success, and certainty in both ; and then being disappointed, we shall disbelieve. Such, I apprehend, has been the primary origin of infidelity in many a learned and scientific mind. It is in vain to say, that their learning and science

ought to have corrected the evil, and taught them the necessary distinction between the knowledge of nature, and of nature's God. Those understand but little of the world and of human nature, who talk thus. In the collision of interests, and the labours of a profession we have seldom leisure, even if we had inclination, to take a sober review of what we have been taught before, and settle how far our general method of reasoning is applicable to the doctrines and evidences of Christianity. That error and ignorance therefore in which the student quits the hands of his master in religion, in the same will he probably continue to the end of his days. Nor would it be so easy for him as we imagine, even if he were desirous, to make the requisite change. Call them prejudices or call them principles ; but certainly the business of education consists in an attempt to imbue the mind with a variety of opinions which the teacher deems to be true ; and thus to pre-occupy the ground of the heart before what he deems false can have had an opportunity of being sown. That by which the heart is thus pre-occupied is never afterwards parted with without a struggle and a sigh. At least I have felt it so myself ; and I would appeal to the experience also of others who have entered the sacred ministry, after having been trained up in an implicit reliance upon a set of rules and principles as capable of solving every difficulty

upon every subject, whether they have not found it most arduous to mould their minds as it were anew, and bring them into subjection to the word of God? Let those then to whom a dispensation of instruction is committed, look well to their charge, and see that they train up a people so grounded and settled in religious principles, that they may neither be willing to admit, nor unfitted for resisting the perverted reasonings of infidelity. There is a pride in being persecuted even for error, if we have ever fancied it to be truth; and a misplaced, but very natural, pity will operate upon the feelings of many, so as to induce them to lean towards those who suffer for their opinions, be their opinions right or wrong. It is not then so much to the sword of justice, as to the pen of the ready writer, and the head of the well-instructed reasoner, that we must trust for defeating the enemies of the Church. It may be right enough to pour down the vengeance of the law upon those blasphemers whose impieties I described in a former Discourse; but it will be of little avail, unless we shut up the avenues to their success, by fortifying the minds of the rising generation so that, “if they take up the serpent, or drink the deadly thing, it may not hurt them^a” It is foolish to urge that education is not intended to make all men theologians, but to prepare them

^a Mark xvi. 18.

for professions, and to instruct them how to rise to eminence and usefulness in their callings. Surely it is intended also to keep them Christians. That is a profession to which all belong; and to teach them to “hold fast their profession without wavering,” and to rise to that eminence in it to which so few attain, is neither to contravene nor to overlook the object of education. What it is necessary for all to know, and must be fatal to all to lose, it can never be unworthy or inexpedient to teach to all. Be it our care, therefore, in these venerable seats of science, to preserve the character of which we boast in our prayers, and to be, or to become, “a seminary not only of sound learning, but of *religious* education.” It would be a shame to continue the prayer without fulfilling it.

LECTURE VIII.

SUCCESS TO BE EXPECTED IN EXPLAINING
SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

1 CoR. XIII. 14.

“Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

PRESUMING the errors which I noticed in some former Discourses to be avoided, and the rules which I laid down in my last Discourse to be observed; presuming also that the general laws of interpretation, when alike applicable to a sacred and a profane work, are both known and attended to, and that, when not alike applicable, they are properly modified by the theological enquirer, it becomes a curious and an interesting problem to determine; first, what degree of success he may reasonably expect in his endeavours to elucidate the difficulties of Scripture; and, secondly, whether this probable degree of success be sufficient for all the necessary purposes of a Christian's faith and practice. These are the two

points which are to be investigated in the present Lecture.

I. Now it seems natural to imagine that success will, in theology, as in every other kind of study, be generally proportioned to the diligence and impartiality with which we make use of our opportunities and means. If, therefore, I have been right in the principles laid down for the explanation of "things hard to be understood," and if those principles were to be employed with vigour, with fidelity, and with judgement in every case, I cannot but suppose also that there would be few of the dark passages and incidents of the Bible which might not in a great measure be illustrated and vindicated by their use. Nor can it be considered as an objection of any real weight against the probability of this extensive and general success, that so many of the "hard things" of Holy Writ have, notwithstanding the repeated and laborious efforts of its advocates, remained hitherto undefended or unexplained. No doubt, learning and ability of every kind have, in almost every period of the Church, been brought to bear upon the interpretation of the Scriptures; and yet, notwithstanding these strenuous and successive attempts, there are perhaps many points which still remain imperfectly accounted for and understood. I admit, for the sake of argument,

this fact ; but I deny that it affords any absolute reason for distrust or despair with regard to our future labours ; because the failures alleged, may, in many instances, be traced to a neglect or a misapplication of the only proper rules of reasoning. Misled by those vain phantoms of speculation before which the unbeliever bows, and anxious, through pride, to encounter and defeat him on his own favourite ground, theologians, as I before observed, have been too often tempted to seize the same forbidden weapons of scholastic warfare, and, as might naturally be expected, have been foiled. If men would fight hopefully and victoriously for God, they must go to no other than God's armoury for their spear and shield : and we shall in fact find that wherever the rules I have laid down have been duly and diligently and humbly employed, they have in general been successfully and triumphantly employed. There are many exceptions of course. There are cases in which previous enquirers had not that knowledge of history, of antiquities, and of languages which would have enabled them to make their modes of defence effectual, and which we now possess. There are perhaps cases in which they had that knowledge, and yet were unsuccessful in the application of their means. But even here we have no ground for giving up the cause as hopeless. We have advantages they

could not enjoy. We have all the lessons derived from the experience of the past to guide us. We have not only the accumulated stores of preceding enquirers to apply to for materials, but we have also all the mistakes they have committed to instruct us in the errors we should avoid, and all the partial light they have diffused over the obscurity of the Bible to conduct us through the windings of the labyrinth, and increase the brightness of that torch of learning which we hold in our own hands. Throw these considerations, however, out of the question, and still I believe, and would maintain, that we have no more reason to deem every thing inexplicable which has not hitherto been explained in the spiritual, than we have to deem every thing impossible which has not hitherto been accomplished in the natural world. In sacred literature, as in profane, a discreet boldness, a patient ingenuity, a cautious modesty, and unwearied meditation directed long and exclusively to one particular subject, may, with a less learned education, a scantier stock of independent acquirements, and fewer external advantages than men in former ages possessed, yet lead the way to discoveries in these enlightened days which men in former ages found it impossible to make. The rapid, extensive and unexpected success which, within a few years has crowned the efforts of a single and unlearned

traveller in an almost hopeless field of antiquarian research, here occurs so forcibly to recollection, and forms so very favourable an illustration of the sentiments I am endeavouring to express, that I cannot forbear, however familiar, to present it to your notice once more.

Look then to the land of Egypt, and mark what the labours of one unaided traveller have lately done. For ages Egypt was the land of historical darkness and doubt. Mystery seemed to have taken up her everlasting abode amongst her monuments, and upon her Pyramids more especially had the conjectures of learning been exhausted in vain. The recesses of one of those mighty masses had indeed long been opened to view; but, though visited, studied, and admired by a succession of the most enterprising and enlightened travellers, few seemed to indulge a hope, and not one attempted, or, at least, succeeded in attempting to penetrate the recesses of the sister wonders. Curiosity gazed on their magnificence with a sigh, pronounced their secrets impenetrable and withdrew. Surely, if ever there was reason to be discouraged and despair, it was here. Yet we know that what the wealth, the wishes, the science and the literature of so many before him were unable to effect, has at length been successfully executed by the single and un-

aided efforts of the unlearned Belzoni. With no guide but experience, no knowledge but what he derived from a long and careful examination of the manner in which the secrets of the open Pyramid had been concealed, and no encouragement but the consideration, that as they were all apparently the works of the same people, an uniformity of construction would probably be found in all;—with no other qualities, in short, than those which I have already mentioned as the best prognostics of success, a discreet boldness, patient ingenuity, and unwearied meditation upon one particular object of research, he has discovered to all the recesses of that monument we deemed impenetrable, and given us a well-grounded confidence that, if equal industry and talents were brought to bear upon those which are still closed, equal success might very reasonably be expected to ensue. Nor has the triumph of this individual been terminated by this solitary instance. I have mentioned his most splendid, but not his only achievement. In every other investigation, the same spirit directed his genius, and issued in similar, though perhaps not equal results; results which are not altogether unconnected with the subject on which I am engaged, inasmuch as some of them at least may serve to confirm and illustrate the historical statements of the Old Testament.

Such have been the discoveries of a man destitute of the advantages of a learned education, unskilled in the languages of ancient times, and deriving the principal information he possessed through the fallacious medium of translations, or from the collections of preceding and more regularly trained enquirers. These discoveries too he has made, not in an easy and obvious field of investigation, but amidst the ruins of a people whose origin and history are but little known, and in a country affording almost as little hope and as many obstacles to his progress as revelation itself presents. Why then should we not think that the obscurities of revelation itself may, in very many instances, be successfully elucidated by the same means? Many of its most secret chambers have been already displayed to the eye and admiration of mankind; and if, as we most rationally believe, the whole Bible has been formed not only under the direction of the same, but of an immutable mind, surely we may most justly expect to find throughout, an essential uniformity of plan. Revelation is, therefore, exactly that sort of subject in which, above all others, the proper application of correct and established rules may be considered as most certain of success. The Scriptures being a monument of ancient days, whose builder and framer is the unchangeable God, it would appear that,

first, to observe and ascertain the method by which those who have gone before us in the way, have laid open its secrets, and then to pursue it with diligence and impartiality, would afford a safe and very favourable prospect of removing its difficulties. But nothing of all this can either be expected or accomplished, unless we study to acquire the same spirit and become endued with the same mental qualities as the individual we emulate. Like him, we may be inferior in learning to those who have failed, and yet succeed. For so vast are the treasures of knowledge which have been laid up by others for our use; and so profound and persevering have been the exertions of our predecessors to facilitate the study of those innumerable branches of science and literature which are connected with the exposition and vindication of God's word, that even without a very deep critical acquaintance with the learned languages, and without much original investigation of the history and antiquities of the oriental world, we may enter readily into their labours, and take advantage of their collective wisdom. But still if we do not also, like him, bend the whole powers of our understanding, and the entire resources of our ingenuity to this single subject of sacred research; if we do not, like him, sit down to meditate in silence and alone, amidst the pages of revelation, (the only sure and authen-

tic records of ages and nations that are gone by ;) and if we be not, like him, content to be buffeted and persecuted for our pains, and to endure the scorn, and hatred, and ridicule which they that despise the Christian name, are ever ready to bestow upon those whose labours in its defence they deem to be either interested or absurd;— if such be not our resolution and frame of mind, most assuredly and naturally shall we fail. For it is not the idle traveller whom curiosity alone induces to wander forth into the revealed Paradise of God, and refresh himself with the sweet waters of the Spirit that is most likely to perceive the beauties, describe the intricacies, and discover the wonders of Providence; but it is he, who with the solemn and serious purpose of increasing spiritual knowledge, is content for years to take up his abode in the deep valley of revelation, to trace narrowly its windings, converse freely with its inhabitants, familiarize himself with its scenes, and labour with unremitted diligence to turn all he either learns or observes, to the benefit of himself and of the world. This is the way of wisdom and of truth. “Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you^a,” is the Redeemer’s promise. Search the Scriptures by day, and meditate upon their counsels by night; bring to the task fervent prayer, an humble spirit, a devoted

^a Matt. vii. 7.

understanding, unwearied assiduity and patient thought;—give thyself wholly to the study of heavenly things, and the knowledge of heavenly things shall be thy reward, and a growing hope of increasing success shall be at once thy companion and thy recompence.

I speak of a growing hope of increasing success, and not of any certain prospect of universal success ; because whilst I would give every possible encouragement to pious industry, I would carefully guard against those chimerical expectations which indolence, ignorance, and presumption are so apt to form. At any rate no single individual ought for a moment to entertain any idea of accomplishing the perfect elucidation of all Scripture Difficulties. From its opening to its closing page, has the book of Revelation been searched by the doubter and denier of its authority, and the hater and despiser of its holiness, to gather up materials for justifying his infidelity, and satisfying his conscience under his sin. He, therefore, who would pursue the Sceptic through every maze, and emancipate the faithful from every snare, would undertake a task endless, and laborious beyond all human endurance. Our desires must consequently be limited to more moderate views ; and it will be found sufficient for any single theologian to attend to some particular class

of difficulties, or to the confirmation of his own and other's faith, by a few powerful and striking illustrations of particular instances in each different class. The shortness of life, were there no other cause, would teach him his inability to complete the plan.

But there is another cause, and that is a difficulty in applying the rules for the elucidation of Scripture Difficulties with propriety and without partiality in each particular case. The clamours of passion, the pride of learning, and the business of the world will each in their turn prevent this ; the clamours of passion, by indisposing us to the fair application of any rules ; the pride of learning, by making us ambitious of a more independent and eccentric course ; and the business of the world, by unfitting us for that calm and continued meditation which alone can lead to a favourable result. But there is even a cause yet deeper than these in the nature and extent of the subject itself to which the rules are to be applied. That the Scriptures contain a system of a most wide and weighty character, conceived by infinite wisdom for the blessing of a fallen world, and carried on from age to age through the instrumentality of the passions and actions of mankind, is a circumstance to which I have already had frequent occasion to allude, and forms the foundation of

one of the most important rules for their illustration. Now, how can man expect in every case to understand this plan? How can the clouded faculties of so limited a being comprehend the adjustment, the proportions, or the propriety of the parts in so vast and so varied an arrangement? In its leading outlines he may with tolerable diligence both perceive and appreciate the fitness of the means to the end; but in the minute incidents and subordinate characters, his ingenuity, however impartial and industrious, must often be baffled in attempting to trace their connection and to point out the mode and utility of their operation. Difficulties, therefore, must necessarily arise in the divine scheme of redemption in which the rule of judging of each part by its connection with others and its influence upon the whole will, however simple and true in itself, be found ineffectual, because, in consequence of our ignorance, inapplicable. The same may also be said of all the other rules. We cannot always determine when or how far inspiration would interfere with the ordinary processes of thought and composition in the sacred writers. Neither, consequently, can we always determine where we ought to interpret the Bible as a divine revelation, and where as an ordinary work, nor what ought to be the exact difference between our judgment and interpretation in each particular case. Lastly, there are cases, as

in the doctrine of predestination, so entirely beyond the reach of our intellectual faculties, that the obscurity in which they are involved cannot be completely removed by us upon any of our common principles. Knowing but "in part," we can reason and conclude only in part. In all these cases, therefore, it is our duty to submit contentedly to the necessity of being ignorant, and confess that there are some spiritual difficulties which, so long as we remain merely men, we can never remove.

The conclusion which I would wish to draw from these remarks is to point out exactly that degree of success which we may expect in our inquiries into "things hard to be understood." It is to shew that, as it will not be unimportant, so neither will it be universal. As patience and perseverance will always do much, we ought to guard against being discouraged by expecting too little. But as in subjects too vast or too high for man, his faculties, even with the aid of the best and simplest rules, will frequently be able to do little, we ought equally to beware of being deceived by expecting too much. We may hope for the accomplishment of far more than has been hitherto done, because the failures of former enquirers may be attributed in general either to their unavoidable ignorance of some necessary circumstance, or to learning mis-

applied ; and because, even were that not the case, we have no reason to deem every thing inexplicable which has remained hitherto unexplained in revelation ; since sacred science, like profane, will ever be progressive when properly and diligently pursued. But we should at the same time be moderate in our hopes, because the difficulties of Scripture are too many and too various to be elucidated in all their extent by the efforts of any single individual, and because the passions of men and the weakness of the mental powers must unfit or indispose them for the proper application of the proper rules.

II. Having thus ascertained that a partial, though very considerable degree of success may be expected in the explanation of “things hard to be understood,” we are next to enquire whether this partial success be sufficient for all the ordinary purposes of religion ; and this point I would most strenuously maintain in the affirmative. Admitting, as I do, that it would be most hopeless to expect to remove every speck which dims the brightness of the Gospel firmament, I would yet, at the same time, contend that it is happily not indispensable to our belief in the Scriptures that they should be altogether purified of obscurity, and that universal success in the elucidation of the difficulties of the Bible is not absolutely necessary

either to our edification or faith. It is not necessary to our edification, because every essential principle is sufficiently plain, and because we shall never be condemned for our errors or ignorance upon those less important points which have not been so clearly revealed, as to be made level to the weakness of our intellectual capacities. It is not necessary to our faith, because, as some portions and passages in Holy Writ, which to our predecessors were in a great measure inexplicable, have been satisfactorily explained in the present age, so it is equally fair and reasonable to suppose, that the same will occur in every future generation, and that the darkness under which we still continue to labour will, in the same manner, though perhaps slowly fade away before the increasing knowledge and inquiries of our successors. There is no cause therefore for assuming that every thing which is indefensible or unintelligible to *us*, is really indefensible and unintelligible in itself, or will necessarily remain indefensible and unintelligible for ever. Some few points there may be in which all the labours of the learned, in every period of the world, may after all prove vain and ineffectual; either on account of the loss of some information which was requisite to their explanation, or because, on account of our limited range of observation and intellect, we are incapable of forming a just esti-

mate of heavenly things. But no one who has made revelation the object of his serious and frequent study, and found, as he must often have found, its difficulties diminishing at every fresh perusal of its pages, will not be convinced that he is justified in looking for a continued recurrence of similar illustrations.—If much of what he *can* see of the divine counsels, be justifiable to man; if so far as he possesses a full comprehension of the divine dispensations, those dispensations are not repugnant to righteousness; if when he is puzzled and confounded by the strangeness of what he is required to believe or do, he can yet see cause to suspect that, from the want of historical or other information, the entire state of the case is not clearly before him, or that the subject is one which relates to beings and things far above out of his sight;—in all these cases he will feel, if he be rightly disposed, that he has neither a right to look for a perfect knowledge, nor to make the difficulties he encounters a ground for rejecting the Bible as the word of God. For why should the Bible differ from every other creation of omnipotence, and be condemned for obscurities which are allowed in every other department of the universe? It is indeed “given by inspiration of God,” and was expressly “written for our learning” and instruction in righteousness; but I have already shewn that neither of

these circumstances demand an absence of those difficulties which exist in other writings, and attach to the natural works of the Almighty. Look then to what is the case with those natural works of the Almighty, and examine whether it be not, and ought not to be, the same with his Word. Lift up your eyes to the Heaven that is above us. It is not less the Heaven, nor is it less the work of its Almighty Maker in a gloomy, than in a glorious day : and if the clouds which float upon its surface in the grey twilight of morning, be occasionally removed during the journey of the Lord of light, so as to leave him at length in the evening to shine forth with the splendours of an unsullied setting, it is as much as we can demand, and far more than we deserve. Sinful and ignorant as we are, we should be grateful both for the presence and the absence of the Sun's beautiful beams ; because both their presence and their absence have their uses, though we perceive them not. So is it also with the Heaven of revelation and the Sun of righteousness. If the darkness which overspreads that spiritual firmament be found gradually to fade away with the increasing light of the intellectual and moral world ; if by the successive and successful efforts of ingenuity and research, the great Ruler of the Gospel day become gradually unfolded to our view, and made to enlighten our

minds with a brighter glimpse of knowledge, and enliven our hearts with a warmer beam of sanctity, far be it from us unthankfully to weep because of his present dimness, or unwisely to shut our eyes upon his partial gleams. Those gleams, though partial, should rouse our senses to a readier perception of their brightness, because arising out of surrounding obscurity; and that dimness no doubt is for our good.—At any rate, it is according to the word of God. For though that word does indeed contain a promise that, at some time or other, we shall “know even as we are known,” yet it also expressly teaches us that this is not the time. It tells us that now we are fated to “know only in part,” and that the fulfilment of the promise is reserved for a future day and a future world, when prophecies shall have failed, and languages have ceased, and knowledge have vanished away. Content then let us be with the pleasing certainty that the light we possess, though feeble, is yet an increasing light, which “groweth more and more unto the perfect day.” And as for that full and unclouded perception of heavenly things to which the Apostle refers,—for that let us wait in a humble and rational reliance upon promise and prophecy; looking patiently for that closing hour of the Gospel day when the whole body of gloominess and thick darkness shall be dis-

sipated in the second coming of the Lord. Let us wait for the splendours of that wondrous period, and the holiness of that heavenly Jerusalem, where there shall be no night at all unto the mind, no need of the candle of reason to glimmer faintly over the works of nature, nor yet of the stronger beams of revelation to illumine the dark places of Providence; because then the tabernacle of God shall be visibly present with men, and his glory shall dwell with them by his Son, and the Lord himself shall lighten them, and the Lamb be their light for ever.



LECTURE IX.

CLASSIFICATION OF SCRIPTURE DIFFICULTIES.

2 PET. III. 16.

“ In which are some things hard to be understood.”

IN our present imperfect and transitory state of being, “ we know but in part, and can, therefore, prophesy and interpret only in part.” For a full and satisfactory comprehension of many mysterious subjects in Holy Writ, we are bound in duty and in reason to wait for a future and more glorious dispensation, “ when that which is perfect being come, that which is in part shall be done away^a.” Such was the conclusion established in the last Discourse, and such is the precept and promise of revelation itself. For this let us look in hope, and for this let us labour also with diligence ; for never was such a promise intended to encourage us to sit down with the folded arms of indolence, and without a single effort to hasten its fulfilment. The child, so long as he continues a child, will certainly, notwith-

^a 1 Cor. xiii. 10.

standing his industry and intelligence, still speak as a child, and understand as a child, and think as a child; but he is not therefore justified from endeavouring to hasten the period when he may become a man in capacity, and put away childish things. So likewise shall we Christians, whilst in the infancy of spiritual apprehension, still fail in attaining those clear and comprehensive views which, in a more advanced state of being, the Angels and disembodied spirits of the redeemed enjoy, and still speak, and understand, and think, as mere carnal men. But let us not, therefore, imagine that we are authorised to shelter our indolence under the plea of ignorance, and defend our inactivity behind the shield of a blind, implicit, and unenquiring faith. As the child in his early years is educated and prepared for the duties of a riper age, so are we placed as probationers upon earth for the purpose of being disciplined for a higher and more exalted state of being. It is, therefore, our business diligently to struggle to overcome our incapacity, and not so much to believe the Bible without examination, as to examine it that we may believe. For this purpose, it belongs to all, "who call themselves Christians," to "search the Scriptures," as far as their ordinary occupations and learning will allow; whilst upon the Ministers of religion a more especial burthen is laid of trying their ut-

most strength in the spiritual conflict, and labouring with all their might both to elucidate particular difficulties and facilitate the elucidation of all.

Now there is nothing which more effectually contributes to confuse our intellects, and prevent a due perception of the mode in which any question should be treated, than an ignorance of its real nature and bearings: and there is nothing which in a complicated subject more effectually contributes to remove obscurity, than a division of it into proper heads. Whilst we are ignorant or in doubt of the class to which a difficulty belongs, our reasonings are framed and directed at random; but when once we have assigned to it its proper description and place, we are immediately able to know how to assail it with argument, and what are the rules to be applied to its solution. With all our accuracy upon this point, we may still indeed be unable to explain or remove it; but we shall at any rate perceive whether it be capable of removal or explanation. I would now, therefore, solicit your attention to a classification of the difficulties of Scripture, a subject more necessary than animating, and rather to be estimated by its importance than interest;—I mean its importance in facilitating the general elucidation of “things hard to be understood.”

There are several distinct modes in which the difficulties of Scripture may be arranged. They may be divided, in the first place, with a reference to the principles by which they are to be illustrated ; and all those difficulties which are capable of being removed by a similar course of argument, may be considered as belonging to the same class. In this way the Transfiguration of our Lord, and the judgements of the Almighty upon Pharaoh, would fall under the same head ; because both are to be vindicated by an application of that rule which requires us to explain the contents of revelation in their true connection, the whole of their connection, and nothing but their connection with each other and the whole. But the Transfiguration of our Lord, and the judgements of the Almighty upon Pharaoh are evidently transactions of such a dissimilar character, that it would be unnatural to assign them a place under the same denomination.—It will, therefore, be more advisable to arrange the difficulties of Scripture in such a manner that each class may designate some common resemblance in the nature of those “ things hard to be understood,” which are joined together for the purpose of illustration.

The following then may be adopted as the three leading divisions to which the difficulties

of Scripture may be reduced, namely, those which relate to the subject matter of which the Bible treats ; those which depend upon the manner in which that subject matter is expressed ; and those which arise out of the concomitant circumstances.

I. Of those “hard things” which originate in the manner in which the subject matter is expressed, the principal and most obvious are, in the first place, those which are entailed upon us by the difficulty of understanding the words, the phraseology, and the syntax of those ancient languages in which the Volume of inspiration has been delivered to each succeeding generation : and, secondly, those which result from the allusions which the authors have made to the customs and manners of the ages and countries in which they wrote or lived. In other words, they are such as are of a verbal, a grammatical, or a philological nature.

II. Amongst the circumstances which serve to distinguish any particular composition, whether it be of an historical or any other kind, the most common are those of time and place. The chronological and geographical difficulties of Scripture may, therefore, be advantageously considered as forming those of the second, or circumstantial class.

III. But by far the most numerous and complicated description of difficulties, are such as take their origin in the subjects about which revelation is conversant ; and to obtain a clearer conception of the different divisions and subdivisions of this class of obscurities, it will be expedient to consider the Bible in various lights, and examine it under several points of view.

1. The Bible, then, is a collection of histories of past events composed at different times and by different individuals. Those histories record facts both of an ordinary and a miraculous character ; and both those ordinary and miraculous facts are pregnant with difficulties and liable to objections on several accounts. The narratives of Scripture are sometimes objected to as impossible in their own nature, as in the extreme age of the antediluvian Patriarchs, and the going back of the shadow on the sun-dial of Ahaz ; and sometimes as irreconcilable with the moral attributes of the Deity under whose superintendence the whole work is stated to have been produced. Again, some portions of the narrative are frequently represented as being inconsistent with the statements of the same transactions in other places of the same volume, and frequently also as contradictory to the admitted truth of profane histories. Of the former kind is the apparent discrepancy between the genealogies of our Lord

as recorded by St. Matthew and St. Luke, and a variety of other seeming incongruities which it is the object of, what are called, Harmonies to reconcile. Amongst the latter may be reckoned the different names assigned by Josephus and the Evangelists to the first husband of Herodias^a. In conformity, therefore, with these remarks we may, first of all, divide the Historical Difficulties into those which arise out of the miraculous, and those which arise out of the ordinary facts and incidents the Bible details ; and then subdivide each of these general heads into the other subordinate kinds.

2. Secondly, the Bible may be regarded as prophetic of future events and characters, and in this respect also may become objectionable, both on account of the clearness and the obscurity of its language, and both from the exactness and the indistinctness of the fulfilment of the occurrences supposed to be foretold.

3. Thirdly, there may be philosophical difficulties in the Scriptures, created by some seeming repugnance between the language of the Bible when speaking of natural phænomena, such as the creation or the deluge, and the generally received or demonstrated truths of physical science. The principles of Metaphysical, as well as Physical,

^a Lardner's Credib. Part I. Book 1. Chap. 5:

science will also be found to furnish frequent causes of philosophical difficulties ; and of this species are all those abstruse, and often indeterminate questions, which have been created by the statements of revelation concerning the existence and essence and attributes of the Deity ; the spirituality and immortality of the Soul ; and many other discussions of a similar nature. To these may be added those doubts and objections which the study of political science has of late introduced, such, for instance, as are connected with the principles of population, the influence of religion upon government, and the union of Church and State. Finally then, we may designate the philosophical difficulties as comprising three separate subdivisions, the physical, the metaphysical, and the political.

4. The Bible may be contemplated as a religious system for the regulation of our opinions and conduct ; and as this is its leading and most important purpose, so the difficulties attending it in this point of view, are proportionally of more consequence. They may be divided into those which relate to the doctrines, and those which relate to the precepts of revelation. Doctrines consist of those truths which are proposed for our acceptance and belief, as the principles of action and motives of obedience. Precepts are those

directions, whether of a moral or ceremonial character, which we are required to obey, either in thought, word, or deed, either towards God, our neighbour, or ourselves; and are either deduced from, or connected with the doctrines previously laid down and supposed to have been already received by the believer. To point out all the subdivisions belonging to each of these heads would be tedious. I shall content myself with remarking that both doctrines and precepts may be obscure or liable to objection on two grounds: first, as they require us to believe or do something apparently inconsistent with the notions we have derived from our own independent reasonings upon natural religion and moral truth; and, secondly, as they seem irreconcilable with some of those fundamental principles with regard to God and our duty, which are established in the pages of revelation itself. Thus the precept of doing good to them that hate us is represented as irreconcilable with all our natural notions of moral rectitude and expediency; whilst the injunctions to the Israelites to exterminate Idolaters are conceived to be in direct opposition to that mild and merciful spirit which revelation in so many other places breathes. So is it also with regard to doctrines. That of the necessity of the co-operation of the holy Spirit in the production of every "good counsel and every just work" of

man, is held to be destructive both of his natural free agency and moral responsibility for his deeds; whilst that of the Divinity of Christ is stigmatised as contradictory to that essential and universally prevailing principle of the Scriptures, that the Lord our God is one Lord, and that, besides him, there is no other God. Sometimes also objections from both these topics are blended together, and together directed against the precepts and doctrines of the Bible.

Such is a sketch of the principal species of those "things hard to be understood" to whose illustration and defence our theological labours are to be directed. It is a sketch manifestly imperfect, as from the extensive and complicated range of subjects embraced by revelation it must necessarily be; but it will be found sufficient to prevent what was the object of forming it, and what is so studiously to be avoided, namely, any great degree of confusion or intermixture of unconnected topics in our enquiries. It is, at least, complete and correct enough to enable any one to select for his own investigation that particular class towards which he may feel drawn by the bent of his genius, or for which he may feel best fitted by the course of his education and the powers and resources of his mind. But when from these general I turn to more particular

considerations, and begin to examine the various kinds of Scripture difficulties in order to select some particular class for the purpose of immediate illustration, I feel most sensibly the arduous task of giving a preference amidst such a multiplicity of contending and nearly equal claims, and the impossibility of making such a choice as to every one may seem the most judicious in the present times, and most consistent with the duties of the office I hold.

Some classes, however there are which may be discarded without a moment's hesitation. The verbal, grammatical and philological difficulties of the Bible are, for instance, truly important in themselves, and most necessary to be explained to others, and demand a degree of learning and ability which would confer honour upon any one who might enter upon their systematic elucidation. Such a task, however, belongs rather to the Commentator than the Preacher, and is fitter for notes to be appended to the text of the sacred volume, than for regular discussion from the theological Lecturer.

The chronological and geographical difficulties, which I have ranged under the second or circumstantial class, are not liable to this particular objection; but there is another inconvenience

which quite as effectually deprives them of any peculiar claim to our first consideration. They are both dry in their own nature and incapable of being explained without the introduction of much classical, and sometimes a portion of mathematical learning. They embrace few if any of the leading principles of religion or morality, and entirely depend for their elucidation upon intricate and laborious calculations, which must be severely tortured indeed before they can be made subservient to any of these practical conclusions on which the Founder of this Lecture lays so great a stress. I have in a previous publication felt this most strongly, and I would appeal to any who may have investigated the Chronology of our Saviour's life, whether if a treatise on such a subject had been delivered from the Pulpit, it would not have been thought somewhat incongruous in the "house of prayer."

In passing forwards to the class of historical difficulties, we shall find that many of these also are unfit for disquisition in a popular discourse before a mixed congregation. To compare and settle the seeming dissonances of the Evangelists, or of the books of Chronicles and Kings, is a labour whose utility none would deny. After all the harmonies which have been published, I may venture to assert that, so arduous is the

accomplishment of the task it is still incomplete, and holds forth a most inviting subject for any youthful, ingenious, judicious and powerful mind. For judgement, ingenuity and power, and many more and even rarer qualifications, are requisite for the perfect harmonist. In fact there is scarce any character which demands greater leisure and learning, patience and perseverance, boldness yet moderation, calmness and yet genius, independence and yet modesty of understanding. So much for this branch. As to the reconciliation of any seeming differences between the writers of the New Testament and profane historians, it is a subject which Lardner has almost exhausted : and Prideaux and others have done much towards establishing the connection and correspondence between the Old Testament and the scanty account still remaining of the Oriental empires. Much however might still be added ; but then the office of Hulsean Lecturer does not afford the most obvious or appropriate opportunity for the attempt. Substantial history whether in its outline or details, is equally interesting and instructive as conveying the principles of what we may call the experimental philosophy of the human mind, and furnishing us with rules both for our own conduct, and our judgement upon that of others. But then it is only the undoubted and admitted facts of history which can do this well.

As soon as we begin to solve doubts and reconcile apparent contradictions, or even to shew that the events recorded are not physically impossible or absurd, the improving tendency of the study is merged in the occupation of the critic, the commentator, or the natural philosopher. Of historical difficulties, therefore, the only subdivision remaining for consideration, consists of those narratives of incidents and characters which seem repugnant to the moral attributes of the Deity, or our general notions of right and wrong. To these, as subjects for popular discourses, not one of the preceding objections applies. They are altogether such as may be made "profitable for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness." They are such as every Christian, however careless or confident in the faith would wish to see explained, and they have this further advantage of being capable of being in general explained upon intelligible and practical principles. They may be made at once both to illuminate the mind, and spiritualize the heart ; and are, therefore, the most fit topics for elucidation before a Christian congregation.

To no one can the recommendation of the last-mentioned kind of difficulties appear unreasonable or exaggerated ; but some may be inclined to maintain that other kinds, the prophetic

difficulties for instance, have an equal claim upon our notice. In this I fully agree. To unravel the intricacies of prophetic metaphors; to fix the limits within which its language may be allowed to be doubtful; to annex ideas to its images, and determine the realities of which its figures are the representations, would, if satisfactorily accomplished, place before us such a wise and beautiful use of the pictures and poetic imagery of the ancient Oriental world, as would convince us that nothing but omniscience and omnipotence combined could have foreseen and fulfilled the events presignified. There is nothing, therefore, which would afford a stronger confirmation of revealed religion than a perspicuous and connected view of its predictions. But in proportion to the magnitude and benefit of the undertaking, are the qualifications required for its performance. It would demand several years of meditation for the production of one well-digested volume upon the subject, and the founder of the Warburtonian Lecture upon Prophecy has judged wisely in the moderate quantity he requires and the ample time he has allowed for the fulfilment of his intentions. The less wise Founder of the present institution has exacted such exorbitant products from the holders of his office as, by turning them into a sort of wholesale manufacturers of discourses for the

press, have precluded them from the possibility of encountering the most abstruse branches of Theology. Whatever then might be my hopes or purposes with regard to the illustration of prophecy, I feel that this is not the office under which it might be engaged in with any good prospect of a satisfactory issue.

There yet remain two other descriptions of Scripture difficulties to be reviewed before making a final selection. The first of them,—the philosophical difficulties,—will be found liable to many of the objections already stated against others. In general at least we must confess that those of a physical and metaphysical kind, are not such as it would be either practically useful or intelligible to discuss.

We are thus brought to the consideration of the last kind of difficulties mentioned, namely, those which relate to the doctrines and precepts of revelation. Here we have indeed both a copious and most beneficial subject of disquisition. Every principle, whether of faith or practice, may here be examined under all its varied relations and forms, and natural and revealed religion may be compared in all their extent, whilst the most satisfactory rules for our conduct and belief will follow as the

natural and necessary inferences from each succeeding enquiry. The difficulties which relate to the doctrines and precepts of revelation, together with such historical difficulties as seem to be repugnant to the moral attributes of the Deity, or the general principles of moral right and wrong, are, therefore, those which appear upon the whole most worthy of being selected for the purpose of immediate illustration. The only doubt can be to which of these two the preference should be given ; and when I consider the present Lectureship as intended to prepare an antidote to prevailing errors, I cannot hesitate in fixing upon the historical difficulties as those which the circumstances of the times have rendered most essential to be vindicated and explained. For it is no longer against the external evidences of revelation that the Sceptic directs his principal efforts and arguments ; but against its internal credibility. “ It so happens,” we are told, “ that the Deist considers this collection of ancient tracts,” (for so he is pleased to designate the Bible) “ to contain sentiments, stories, and representations, totally derogatory to the honour of God, destructive to pure principles of morality, and opposed to the best interests of society.” Consequently, “ he adds, it is generally considered that a statement of the absurdities, or supposed absurdities, of divine revelation, is the best

apology for Deism^a.” Such being the ground which Infidelity has declared, for the present, to be her strongest and her favourite post, it is on this ground that for the present, it will be most expedient to meet her, and to refute, as far as it is in our power, those calumnies she so boldly proclaims against the sacred writings, as the record of the most atrocious enormities; against the inspired writers, as descending to minute and loathsome obscenities; and against the chosen favourites of Heaven, as manifesting, on the most public occasions, a contempt of the first principles of morality. These accusations are too serious and too frequently and positively alleged to pass without some attempt to meet the objection. Those to whom the care of such things has been assigned by Providence and the regulations of society, are bound to resist the charge and prepare an answer which may be accessible and intelligible to all, as far as the nature of the case will permit. To collect, therefore, and to arrange the scattered information of preceding divines, to correct what they may have misapprehended, to add what they have forgotten, and to fulfil what they have left incomplete in the elucidation of those moral difficulties which arise out of the historical incidents and representations of Scripture, and to

^a See the “ Trial of Thomas Davison for publishing a blasphemous Libel.” 1820.

frame the defence as far as it may be possible in conformity with those principles which have been already laid down for the general interpretation of “things hard to be understood ;”—this is the object which I propose to pursue in the remaining portion of the present course of Lectures. To some this plan may appear to afford but little scope for the introduction of original views. But utility, rather than originality, should, in every religious undertaking, be our principal aim; and I cannot but think that by considering the historical difficulties of Scripture in the order in which they follow each other in the Bible itself, we shall not only contribute something to the right understanding of many of the obscurer parts of the word of God, but form also a very convenient book of reference for those who may feel disturbed by difficulties of this kind.

Here then I conclude the classification of “things hard to be understood,” and with it the consideration of the subject of Scripture difficulties in general. In the remainder of the course, I shall enter upon a particular consideration of those historical passages which have been most frequently made use of against revelation by the modern Deists, commencing with those which are to be found in the book of Genesis. That this selection will be deemed the most judicious by

all, it were in vain to expect. The difficulties which each man has felt most puzzling to his own mind, and most dangerous to his own faith, are, of course, those which he will deem most worthy of being first considered. Hence, the prophetic, the genealogical, or doctrinal difficulties have already been recommended to me as the proper objects of elucidation in the first instance ; and it is to apologise to those who have made the suggestions, as well as to explain the grounds of a different choice, that I have entered so much at length into the reasons by which that choice has been determined. The preference once given, must, of necessity, be steadily pursued, or all hope of producing a connected and useful manual against the objections of unbelievers be resigned. I would, therefore, beseech every one to reflect, whether the circumstances and writings of the times in which we live have not given a prominence to the selected class of difficulties which renders their early consideration a matter of immediate importance. But whether the choice which has been made, be censured or approved, at least let no Christian, who holds the honour of his Redeemer, and the welfare of souls in estimation, withhold his prayers for the success of the undertaking. These difficulties have proved offences to many unstable minds, and perchance made shipwreck of the faith of some, and may

yet bring perdition on the heads of more. Be ye zealous, therefore, and continual in your supplications to God, for every one that would search into and vindicate the will of the Lord, knowing that “the effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit^a.” It was the same earth upon which both these events fell, and they fell upon it at the bidding of another. The natural powers of the soil were unaltered and unsubdued through the whole, but the dew of God’s blessing was taken away, when no prayer for its continuance reached his ears, and consequently it was dried up and withered into barrenness. Trust ye not, therefore, for the support of your faith to the natural powers of any individual intellect. They may be vigorous, they may be sound, they may be penetrating; yet wherein are they to be accounted of, if their fruitfulness be not called for in prayer? Independent of the outpourings and refreshings of the Spirit, the understanding is nothing. Let God but speak the word, and the fountain of its efficacy in operation is closed,—the spirit of

^a James v. 16—18.

weariness overtakes its vigour, the spirit of delusion supplants its soundness, and the spirit of slumber seals up its penetration for ever. Ye then that be righteous, remember how the righteous Elias was heard, and pray ye that it be not so. Lift up your voices unto the God "that heareth prayer," and call down the living waters of pure and perfect wisdom to fertilize the fruitless wilderness of a mere speculative mind. Be it your labour, as it is your duty, thus to strengthen the hands of the feeble, and refresh the faintness of them that are weak and wearied through the earnestness of thought. "Watch ye thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all, but specially for us, that utterance may be given unto us, that we may open our mouth holdly and wisely to make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which we are ambassadors^a:" that, as by the power of the Spirit the Apostles of our Lord were endued with a tongue from on high to speak the wonderful works of God in words, intelligible to all, so we Ministers of Christ may also be empowered to understand and to declare "things hard to be understood," and turn the mockings and doubtings of them that disbelieve into the language of wonder and praise for the revelation of God's love.

^a Ephes. vi. 19, 20.

LECTURE X.

THE OFFERINGS OF CAIN AND ABEL,
AND THE
ORIGIN OF ANIMAL SACRIFICES CONSIDERED.

PART I.

GENESIS IV. 4.

*“The Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering;
but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect.”*

ONE of the immediate consequences of the fall, appears to have been that prudential arrangement for the purpose of lightening toil, which, in the political philosophy of modern days, is designated the division of labour. The curse upon the ground, and man's banishment from the beauty and blessings of the Garden which God had planted for his delight and support, made such a change in the situation of the human race, as to render it necessary that some should exclusively employ their powers in the production of food for the common sustenance. The condition of the animal creation, seems also, at the same time, to have been so far deteriorated,

as to require the care and superintendence of a rational being, for the preservation and defence of at least the more helpless species. Hence Abel is represented to us as “a keeper of sheep,” and Cain as “a tiller of the ground.”

But whatever may have been the diminution of God's kindness towards a sinful and corrupted race, his presence was neither altogether withdrawn, nor his power and providence unfelt, nor his mercies left unacknowledged by the incense of grateful piety. “In process of time, it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof^a.” According to his respective occupation, and out of the increase with which his labour had been recompensed, each made a return after his manner and power; expressing by the act of his hands, the feelings of his heart, and confessing the great source from whence all blessings flow, by bringing an appropriate offering unto the Lord and the giver of all good things. The act of worship and gratitude was not, however, received in the same manner from both, nor were the two brothers alike approved in their deed of piety. “The Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering; but unto Cain

^a Gen. iv. 3.

and to his offering he had not respect." What was the reason of this different treatment is not explicitly stated ; and a similiar obscurity is also left upon the mode in which the approbation and disapprobation were severally expressed. Both these points, therefore, if they are to be determined at all, must be gathered from a careful review of the whole circumstances of the transaction.

Upon the latter of these questions, however, that is, upon the manner in which the divine approbation or disapprobation was shewn, I shall not take the trouble to dwell. The wrath of Cain ; his fallen countenance and his uplifted hand, his countenance fallen in sullen and envious melancholy, and his hand lifted up against his brother in unholy wrath, bear sufficient testimony to the preference which Abel obtained, and to the reality of the rejection of Cain, and to the clearness with which both were revealed. Whether, as in after times, the acceptance of Abel's offering was proclaimed by the descent of a fire from Heaven upon the altar, or by an answer proceeding from the Shechinah of God's glory, or by a whirlwind, or an earthquake, or a still small voice, is a matter not only of extreme uncertainty, but also of very little comparative importance. The truth of the fact is what alone

we are particularly concerned to know, and that the words, the circumstances, and, above all, the sad consequences of the tale declare.

But the inquiry into the ground and reason of the difference between the acceptableness of the two sacrifices, is a question of another kind ; far more essential and, on a casual inspection, not less obscure. The equity of God is deeply involved in it. For to justify so marked a distinction as that which subsists between respect and a want of it, we must find out some corresponding distinction between those who were made the subjects of such opposite treatment. The offering or the offerer must be proved on the one side to have had some comparative or positive excellence, or, on the other, to have had some positive or comparative demerit and defect.

I. First then, the words in which the rejection and acceptance are specified by the historian, have seemed to some to imply that the sacrifices themselves were the foundation of that difference with which the individuals who offered them were received. "To Abel and to his offering," says Moses, "the Lord had respect ; but to Cain and to his offering he had not respect." Such is the phrase ; and it is said that by a figure common to all languages, and particularly prevalent in that

in which the book of Genesis was originally composed, we are authorised to consider it as probably intending to imply that God had respect to the offering of Abel in itself. If this be the true interpretation, the offering of Abel must have been superior to that of Cain, either in its nature, its magnitude, or its quality. If however we take the sacrifices of Abel and Cain and consider them impartially together, we shall find it extremely difficult, from their nature alone, to account for the preference which was shewn to that of the former. For when we bring the intrinsic character of the offerings themselves to the test of ordinary reason, and institute a comparison between them for the purpose of determining their relative value on the common principles of human estimation, we are not only at a loss to explain the grounds of the preference, but are almost tempted to think that it ought to have taken a different direction. Abel's was a bloody, Cain's a bloodless sacrifice. Abel's quenched the sacred principle of life in the sentient creatures of the Almighty's goodness, and inflicted pain and robbed of their happiness and their being those to whom the hand of Heaven had communicated both. Cain did but bring the fruits of the ground which the word of God had authorised him to take and to enjoy. Abel sacrificed what, he had no permission, either express or

implied, to use for food ; whilst Cain appeared with that which he had been allowed and commanded to eat. The one came with hands still reeking with his victim's blood ; the other, in the simplicity of the primeval occupation, adorned the altar of the Lord of life with the beautiful products of that vegetable nature which had been ordained for universal use and admiration. Look only to this representation ; weigh only the essential nature of the things offered, and it will require but little penetration to perceive, that the sacrifices, considered merely in themselves, could not have been the only ground of the superior acceptableness of that of Abel. Upon this footing, the balance would appear rather to preponderate in favour of Cain.

Considerations like these have not failed to operate both with Deists and Divines. The Deist has triumphed in the supposed impropriety, if not inhumanity, of representing the Deity to have marked his preference of a sanguinary service ; and the Divine, to meet the objection, has consequently insisted, not so much upon any difference in the nature, as in the quantity or quality of the respective offerings. But as far as quantity is concerned, there is nothing to authorise any certain conclusion : and I can scarce persuade myself that any more definite

opinion can be formed upon the quality of what was presented. It is true that Cain is only stated to have "brought of the fruits of the ground," whilst of Abel it is added that "he brought of the *firstlings* of his flock and the *fat* thereof." There is here an evident difference of expression, and more is said of one sacrifice than of the other. Yet it may be very dubious whether this difference was purposely introduced. Still less positive ought we to be in asserting that it was designed to reprobate the worthlessness of the offering of Cain, or as implying his want of reverence in withholding from God the best of his substance, and profaning the service of religion by bringing of that which cost him nothing. For if every little variation in the words of the narrative is to be deemed a sufficient foundation for grave and solid argument, there are other variations to be found which an ingenious mind might contrive, with equal ease, and equal reason to turn to the advantage of Cain. Thus of Abel it is only said that he brought his offering, whilst of Cain it is added that he brought it as "an offering *unto the Lord*;" and had this last expression been found as exclusively applied to Abel, as it is to Cain, I doubt not but that it would have been insisted upon as a cogent argument for the superiority of his religious feelings and views. But upon such minute particulars

it is generally hazardous to rest much. The soundest way of arriving at the true object of Scripture is by considering the general tenor and complexion of the whole passage : and it is always unsafe and unsatisfactory to make large and decided conclusions from phrases whose introduction or omission might be only casual. I am not however inclined altogether to deny that the offering of Cain was inferior in quality to that of Abel. Perhaps it was. Perhaps the expressions of Moses render it probable. I merely mean to say that the opinion, as being only probable, is not sufficient to bear the weight imposed on it, of accounting for the issue which followed ; and that it will be better to resort to the literal interpretation of the text. It will be both wiser and safer to explain the phrase, in which it is said that “to Abel and his offering the Lord had, but to Cain and his offering he had not respect,” as referring to the individuals alone, or, at least, as comprehending both the individuals and their sacrifices, and not as being confined to their sacrifices.

In this light the matter has been generally viewed. Some moral or religious qualification is conceived to have sanctified both the person and offering of Abel ; and this seems also to be the opinion which the narrative of Moses himself has

authorised us to form. For when God expostulated with Cain upon his wrath, he said, “Why art thou wroth and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?^a” Thus was it implied that his offering had not been accepted because he had not done well. The same reason is more explicitly put forth by St. John, when he declares that Cain’s “works were evil and his brother’s righteous^b.” But in what respect Abel had done well; in what respect his works were righteous and his brother’s evil, is not expressly pointed out in either of these passages, and, therefore, we still find a considerable difference of opinion with respect to the nature of that qualification in Abel which recommended his sacrifice in preference to that of Cain.

By some the preference is attributed to the object and intention with which the offerers presented their respective offerings. They suppose the Lamb of Abel to have been slain as an expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice, an express and intended prefiguration of the great Christian atonement; whilst the fruit of Cain was, in their opinion, nothing more than an eucharistical and self-righteous service, a mere profession of gratitude for having received from God the food

^a Gen. iv. 6, 7.

^b John iii. 12.

which he deserved. But, besides there being no traces of such a notion in the narrative itself, we assume far more than we can prove, when we suppose that the same distinction of sacrifices which was afterwards established in the Mosaic Law, was known and admitted at so early a period of the world ; and it would be difficult to demonstrate that the sacrifice of Noah, the next in the order of time, was any thing else than a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise for his mighty deliverance from the perils of the universal flood. If indeed it could be allowed that the first parents of mankind had been clearly informed with regard both to the person, the office, and the sufferings of the Messiah, we might have some ground for maintaining that Abel intended the firstlings of his flock to be a direct representation of the future death of Christ upon the cross, a professed type of the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." But such an idea contradicts the whole tenor of Scripture. The only recorded revelation, of this great event at that time was the promise of a victory over the serpent ; which though sufficiently positive to enliven hope, was too indefinite to convey any exact knowledge of the means or time of the triumph. The only points which God had vouchsafed to reveal after the fall, and the only allusion he then made to the means of our

redemption from the enemy, was contained in the declaration that there should be enmity between the serpent and the woman's seed, and that the latter should obtain a decided superiority over the former. The time, the manner, and the individuals for whom this great triumph was reserved, were left alike in the most perfect obscurity. In consequence, and as a proof of this obscurity, we find each succeeding generation firm in their belief of the fulfilment of the promise, but doubtful as to the person and mode and period of its fulfilment. To attribute, therefore, to Abel such an accurate insight into the great scheme of human redemption as enabled him distinctly and consciously to typify it by his offering, is without any authority and contrary to every reasonable presumption, to endue him with a degree of religious light which, until the sacrifice of Christ was completed on the Cross, seems never to have been entirely unveiled to any.

But though Abel himself could not have so thoroughly understood the "shedding of blood for the remission of sins," as to make an offering of blood as a type of the propitiation of Christ, yet doubtless the Almighty had already fixed the plan of our salvation in his immutable counsels, and might have instituted animal sacrifices to prefigure it. He might have commanded the

firstlings of the flock to be slain in order to indicate, by the victim's death, the kind of propitiation which would be accepted for our sins, and to shew, by the continued existence of such rites in the world, that the plan of redemption which was afterwards to be accomplished on the cross, was the very plan which from the beginning had been predetermined for our salvation from punishment and guilt. This is, in fact, at present the favourite and almost universal hypothesis among divines. They conceive that God had no sooner pronounced the sentence upon the transgression of our first parents, and snatched them from despair by the promise of some future mitigation of their woe, than he instituted the ordinance of animal sacrifices, as a mode of worship and a type of the Messiah wounded for our iniquities, and brought as a lamb to the slaughter for our atonement. They next conceive that Abel believed in this appointed propitiation for sin, and by faith in its efficacy brought a more acceptable and excellent sacrifice than Cain, to whom the efficacy of blood was a stumbling-block and foolishness, and who in the presumption of unbelief rejected its aid, and changed the nature of the offering.

Such is the prevalent opinion upon this point ; and certainly if the divine institution of sacrifices

at so remote a period could be either clearly shewn, or only fairly inferred, the obedience of Abel and the implied disobedience of Cain to so sacred a command would form a satisfactory reason for the distinction shewn in the reception of their offerings. But where is this divine institution of sacrifices to be found? The enactments of the Mosaic Law, or even the command to Abraham to offer Isaac, are found in Scripture indeed, and incontrovertibly contain a divine command for sacrifice; but they were long posterior to the event we are considering: and it is freely admitted that there is no positive injunction for animal sacrifices expressly related in any previous part of the sacred Volume. Yet notwithstanding this want of any direct appointment, it is still maintained that such an appointment was made immediately after the fall, and that its omission by Moses may be easily accounted for by the brevity of his narrative, and the subsequent renewal of the institution under the Law. Each of these pleas I will now proceed to examine in their order, throwing aside, as far as possible, all those collateral inquiries and all that cumbrous load of controversial learning with which the question has been almost overwhelmed.

1. The brevity of the Mosaic records, in the

earlier portion of the history of the human race, is confessed. No mind of common curiosity can contemplate this compendious narrative and not be tempted, however reluctantly, to express a regret at the many interesting points they have left unnoticed in matters of literary and scientific research. But in religion, brief as the book is, it is full enough for all the essential purposes of instruction, and the more carefully it is examined the more clearly it will be perceived to have left out nothing profitable for practice, or material to faith. It cannot however be denied but that the omission of the divine institution of sacrifices, if such an institution had from the beginning taken place, is the omission of a piece of most material and profitable information. A little addition to the bulk of his composition is, therefore, what the author might very properly have granted to himself for the insertion of such a fact. The truth however is, that no addition whatever would upon this occasion have been required. I will not argue with Warburton, that when Moses introduces the phrase, "In process of time it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground," he means us to infer that he and Abel brought their offerings from the dictates of their own minds. But I will say that if, instead of stating that "In process of time it came to pass," he had declared that, "It

came to pass as the Lord had commanded," he would not have increased the length of his work, and he would have done all we could reasonably wish. The substitution of one phrase for the other would have settled the doubt and not injured his brevity. For we wanted no "formal history of the rite," no "formal account of its origin, explaining *how* or *when* it was instituted^a" by God. We wanted merely an assurance of the fact that God had commanded the practice of animal sacrifices, and that assurance, by a mere change of expression, might have been introduced without at all increasing the bulk of the history. Brevity, therefore, alone cannot possibly be regarded as the reason of the omission of the divine command for sacrifice, if actually given.

2. But it is further stated, that the subsequent injunctions for sacrifices in the Law, made the repetition of the command needless in the book of Genesis, and that, consequently, because needless it was omitted.

It is certainly true that sacrifices of every kind were solemnly and positively instituted by God in the Mosaic law, and that, consequently, neither did the Jews require any additional authority for the practice, nor we ourselves any additional vindication of its propriety. But was

^a Magee on Atonement, vol. II. page 79.—Edit. 3.

not the Sabbath also enjoined with still more solemnity and fulness by Moses in the Law? The ordinance of the Sabbath stands not like the ordinance of sacrifices only amongst the ceremonial rites of the Jewish covenant. It has a higher place, a more impressive character assigned to it by being embodied amongst the ten primitive and fundamental commandments, which were entrusted to the Prophet on Mount Sinai. Nor is this holy ordinance merely inculcated as a precept. Its reason is added and its mode of observance prescribed. Yet notwithstanding all these various circumstances, which might have seemed to render any further notice of the institution needless, Moses has distinctly recorded the origin of the Sabbath in its proper place in Genesis, and that not of necessity or because his narrative would have been incomplete without it. He has almost interrupted the progress of his narrative for its introduction, or, if this be too much to assume, we must at least allow that the account is incidentally and parenthetically made. Surely, then, upon the same principle, he might have been expected to have recorded with equal distinctness the original institution of sacrifices. I venture to urge this point strongly, because what has been said in diminution of the force of the argument appears entirely to fail.

The observation of Delaney^a that as Moses had loaded the rite of sacrifice with many additional ceremonies he might have wisely designed not to record the simplicity of the original institution, "lest the Jews might think themselves ill used by any additional burden of trouble or expence," is not of much weight ; and, if true, would assign to Moses a mode of proceeding scarce consistent with historical honesty. The other remark, of Magee^b, that Moses recorded the origin of the Sabbath to enforce with greater weight upon the Jews the religious observance of its duties, is still more destitute of importance. For if, as some suppose, the mention of the Sabbath in Genesis does not imply its divine institution from the beginning, no force whatever is added to the fourth commandment by such a notice of its object. I deprecate, however, most earnestly this idea, and would ever maintain that the origin of the Sabbath was coeval with the world. But what advantage does this admission give to the reasoning we combat ? The original establishment of the seventh day, as a day of holy rest, which Moses relates in the second chapter of Genesis, he simply relates in his character of an historian. In the book of Exodus he issues out his authoritative command for its inviolable repose and sanctity, as a Legislator and a Prophet

^a Revelation Examined, Vol. I. p. 137.

^b Magee, Vol. II. p. 77.


commissioned from Heaven. The passage in Genesis was written by his own mortal, though not uninspired pen; the latter by the finger of the eternal God. In Genesis the origin of the Sabbath is briefly noticed as a fact, and no commandment for its celebration given. In the Law it is detailed with its accompanying reasons, and the method of its observance is minutely pointed out and most solemnly enforced. In the one it forms only a part of a continuous narrative. In the other it is singled out from every other positive rite to be bound up for ever amongst the moral commandments, and in the same page with the prohibition of murder and the duty of filial obedience. In what possible respect then, could this repetition or anticipation of the institution of the Sabbath in Genesis, either strengthen or increase the necessity or the solemnity of its religious observance as laid down in the Law? What new or more "particular information" did it convey "of the time and occasion of its first institution?" The command for the Sabbath, which as the messenger of the Most High, Moses brought down from the Mount, and the thunders and the glories of God, could receive no fresh sanction from his narrative as an historian; nor could his casual notice of the Sabbath as a man, render more sacred the full and circumstantial account which God himself vouchsafed to write.

Except then for the purpose of making us acquainted with the fact and the time of the original establishment of a day of rest for man, there was no imperative call upon Moses for introducing this statement upon the subject in Genesis. But, doubtless, he thought such a piece of religious history would be both acceptable and useful to man, and as a faithful, though concise historian, he has therefore inserted it. Now we maintain that similar motives would have operated with him in a still higher degree in the case of sacrifices; and that, had they been instituted by God before the offerings of Abel and Cain, he would scarce have failed to notice the institution. For though sacrifices are most minutely described and most solemnly enjoined in the Mosaic Law, yet their divine origin at an earlier period would still have been a most interesting fact to be known. It does then undoubtedly seem strange that the communication of this interesting fact should have been withheld by one who has so carefully recorded, and, as some would suppose, even anticipated the first institution of the Sabbath. But still more unaccountable does the omission become when we reflect, that it is universally allowed, that had a divine command for the practice of animal sacrifices been contained in the fourth chapter of Genesis, every difficulty connected with the acceptance of Abel's

offering would have been removed. Why then did not the inspiration under which Moses wrote, lead him both to the knowledge and communication of this command for sacrifice, if actually given after the fall, and thus simplify to believers the defence of this memorable transaction? In a word, why was a fact at once so interesting and so material in a religious point of view omitted by him, whose object it appears to have been to give an account of every thing of that nature. These are questions which naturally arise to the mind; and until these questions have been answered, we may safely maintain, that the insertion of the divine institution of sacrifices, would not have been a needless insertion in the book of Genesis, and that it is, consequently, impossible to maintain, that the fact was omitted by Moses, because of its needlessness.

Up to this point the reasoning into which we have entered seems sound. First, the brevity of Moses would not have been injured by mentioning the divine institution of sacrifices: this brevity therefore cannot possibly account for his not mentioning it. Secondly, even if the insertion of the fact had been almost needless, the manner in which he has acted with regard to the Sabbath would yet have taught us to expect the insertion as a mere matter of history; and this expectation

is raised into certainty by the conviction that the fact of the divine institution of sacrifices, instead of being needless, is one of the most material consequence in a religious point of view. After carefully reviewing these arguments and conclusions, I cannot perceive in them any apparent fallacy. I am aware, however, that there are yet other grounds upon which the silence of Moses may be accounted for. However necessary it may be for believers to know that sacrifices had been commanded to Abel and Cain, it was not necessary for the historian explicitly and verbally to state it, provided the information can be gathered either by natural inference from his narrative, or deduced from other and independent considerations. This must be allowed. The discussion, therefore, of these two points, namely, first, whether a positive injunction from God for the practice of animal sacrifices be not implied, though not expressed, by Moses in his narrative ; and, secondly, whether it may not be established by reasoning altogether exclusive of the narrative of Moses, is that to which we must proceed in the following Lecture.



LECTURE XI.

THE OFFERINGS OF CAIN AND ABEL,
AND THE
ORIGIN OF ANIMAL SACRIFICES CONSIDERED.

PART II.

GENESIS IV. 3, 4.

“In process of time it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord And Abel he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof.”

SUCH was the first recorded act of worship amongst mankind, such the first recorded sacrifice which was laid upon the altars of the Almighty. A bloody and a bloodless offering were both presented before the Lord; and the bloody was accepted and the bloodless despised. “The Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering, but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect.”

To those who suppose that sacrifices were instituted from the very beginning by the Deity himself, and prescribed as a mode of atonement immediately after the fall, there can be but little

difficulty in explaining and accounting for the preference thus shewn. They have but to remark that the offering of Abel was in strict obedience to the divine command, and the respect he obtained becomes sufficiently justified. They have but, on the other hand, to observe how Cain substituted a vegetable for an animal sacrifice, and infer, from this direct violation of a positive ordinance of God, that his presumptuous disobedience to Heaven's decree was the natural and necessary cause of all the disrespect and disapprobation with which his religious services were received.

Simple, however, as this representation of the case may be, and easily as it may elucidate every obscurity which attends this memorable transaction, we should never for a moment permit ourselves to forget that it is with the truth, and not with the simplicity, of the principle which he assumes as the basis of his reasoning that an impartial enquirer is principally concerned. A mind of piety may often be tempted to embrace hypotheses and acquiesce in conclusions, because of their manifest usefulness in removing difficulties and illustrating the equity of God's government of the world. A religious heart will often accept the excellence of an opinion for an evidence of its correctness, and pleased with the advantages

derived from its admission, feel little inclination to investigate severely its claims. But a solid judgement and a cautious understanding should ever be on its guard against a delusion so soothing and so consistent with the humility of a finite reason. Did a reverential submission to the revealed declarations of the will of the Almighty pervade, in any considerable degree, the world in which we live; were all, or even most men, poor in spirit and not proud in thought, then indeed the mode of proceeding to which I have alluded might be more readily allowed to continue without check; because a really religious enquirer would seldom if ever be led into any serious error by its adoption. But surrounded, as we are, by men anxious to discover and able to detect our very smallest deviation from the essential rules of right reasoning, and to turn the mistakes of the advocates of the Bible into an argument against its inspiration or truth, we never can be too careful of the positions we assume, or the means by which we defend or explain the difficulties of Scripture.

It was under the influence of considerations like these that I felt it a duty in the preceding Discourse to scrutinise with such strictness the arguments upon which the supposed divine institution of sacrifices before the Mosaic Law, is founded

and maintained. It was with this view that I endeavoured to shew that, as it is universally allowed that no positive injunction for the practice of sacrifices is expressly recorded by Moses in the book of Genesis, so neither can any sufficient reason be assigned why he should have omitted all mention of a command so interesting in a religious point of view, if it had actually been given at that early period of the world. Neither the conciseness of his ante-diluvian history, nor the subsequent institution of sacrifices in the wilderness, which he has so carefully and minutely detailed, seems to afford any thing like a decisive proof that Moses intentionally suppressed the fact of their previous establishment by God. In the same spirit of rigid and impartial enquiry, we must now proceed to examine into the other arguments by which theologians have attempted to prove that his silence may be accounted for and explained. These arguments may be arranged under two distinct heads. First, those which endeavour to shew that the divine institution of animal sacrifices after the fall is implied, though not expressed, in the Mosaic narrative; and secondly, those which are founded upon circumstances altogether independent of that narrative.

I. 1. Now the first of those remarks from which divines have laboured to infer the divine

institution of animal sacrifices in the very first ages of the world, is too weak almost to require a refutation. The familiarity, they observe, with which the mention of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel is introduced, evinces a pre-existing practice. Familiarity of expression undoubtedly implies a pre-existent practice, a practice admitted and consequently existing before the period at which the expression was used. Had Abel, therefore, himself been the historian of the incident, much force might have been due to this remark, and we should have been authorised, in some measure, to assume that he spoke of what was neither a new nor a singular mode of worship amongst men. But the whole weight of this inference is destroyed the moment we reflect that Moses, and not Abel, was the author of the book of Genesis, and that to the Israelites and not to the ante-diluvians was the narrative addressed. The familiarity of the manner, therefore, with which the mention of sacrifice is introduced, marks merely the intimacy of Moses and the Israelites with the idea and use of that religious ordinance. This is an intimacy which it would have been strange indeed if they had not imbibed from their residence in Egypt, the establishment of the Passover, and the multitude and variety of their legal offerings. But it is an intimacy which cannot be made to imply, in the smallest degree,

the existence of a divine command for such offerings so soon after the fall.

2. If the preceding argument be destitute of all strength, that which we are next to consider is so full of uncertainty and doubt as to be equally useless and inapplicable. "In process of time," we read in our English Bibles, "it came to pass that Cain brought an offering unto the Lord." But this we are told is an incorrect translation of the Hebrew expression, which ought not to have been rendered "*In process of time,*" but *At the close of the appointed season*. Admit the truth of this remark in its fullest extent, and still it will be found incapable of establishing the point it is intended to prove. It will still be a matter of doubt for what purpose this season had been appointed; and those who assert that it was the season which had been already appointed by God himself for the celebration of sacrifices as an act of worship and propitiation for sin, assume the divine institution of that very rite whose divine institution is the subject of debate. The real truth however is, that this is not the proper mode of translating the original words, but only the interpretation which is put upon that translation by those who defend the divine origin of sacrifices. The true rendering is universally admitted to be that which is found

in the margin of our own authorised Version. After days, or “at the end of days, it came to pass that” Cain and Abel brought their offerings to the Lord : and so general is this phrase, so indefinite in its meaning, and so capable of being moulded into any form which the prejudices and pre-conceived opinions of the expositor may require, that both the divine and human institution of animal offerings have been alike attempted to be supported by a reference to its authority. Warburton believed that human reason alone had dictated the slaughter of victims as an act of piety at God’s altar, and considering that the phrase *at the end of days* was equivalent to the words *in process of time*, maintained that Moses himself must have intended us to infer the human origin of sacrifices from his narrative^a. Others, as we have seen, have conceived the historian to speak of some appointed season at the close of which the two brothers appeared with their sacrifices, and hence would infer that the rite of sacrifice had been previously commanded by God. Nor is this all. There are still others who, with Kennicott^b maintain that the expression was intended to imply the end of a certain and determinate number of days, and consequently

^a Div. Leg. lib. ix. chap. ii. Vol. III. p. 661. 4to.

^b Two Dissertations, p. 178.

insinuate that it was the conclusion of the week, and in the solemn and appointed day of holiness and rest, that these acts of worship occurred. Thus, as each man's sentiments have been previously formed, has he contrived to force a confirmation of their truth out of the mouth of Moses, and to prove, by an adaptation of Scripture to his pre-determined notions, that the sacred writers themselves have given authority to his views. Strong indeed must be the faith, or weak the arguments of those who, amidst such a variety of contending interpretations, can be induced to rest much upon the looseness of such an indefinite and perhaps casual expression.

3. The consuming of Abel's sacrifice by fire from Heaven, has been insisted upon, in the third place, as affording not only a strong, but a decisive proof of the primitive and divine institution of animal sacrifices. But we have already seen that the question, whether the respect shewn to the offering of Abel was shewn by fire, or by some other demonstration of the Almighty's approbation, is a question as much controverted, and as dubious, as the divine institution of sacrifices itself. This dubious fact can never, therefore, be brought forward with the force of a conclusion deduced from undeniable premises. But even were the fact completely established,

it must be still evident to every impartial mind, that the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice by fire, can prove no more than its acceptance by any other mode; and it is equally clear, that the approbation of an act of piety after it has been performed, has no necessary or essential connection with the previous existence of a positive command for its performance. The acceptance, therefore, of Abel's sacrifice, however displayed, marks only the fact of its having been grateful to the Being it was intended to please.

4. I feel the dryness and the dulness of these details. I lament every moment and every line, which, in this sacred place, is not calculated to influence the devotional principles of the soul, or directed to the moral and religious edification of man. I turn, therefore, with pleasure from arguments which are founded only upon critical considerations, to one which, in some slight degree at least, is connected with the nature and obligation of those duties which we owe to our Creator. "Nadab and Abihu," we are told, "offered strange fire before the Lord which he commanded them not. And there went out a fire from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord^a." The ark of God shook as it was carried by oxen from Gibeah, "and

^a Levit. x. 1, 2.

Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah ; and God smote him there for his error ; and there he died by the ark of God^a.” Uzzah was smitten because without authority, he presumed to stay up the tabernacle of God’s dwelling by his fleshly arm. Nadab and Abihu were devoured, because they appeared to perform their services unto the Lord with fire, which he commanded them not. These were awful visitations, and impress upon us as strongly as it is possible for the language of fact and example to speak, the sinfulness and the hatefulness of every species of will-worship in the eyes of the Almighty, when offered under similar circumstances. Is it then possible to suppose that God would have deviated from his established plan, and have accepted the offering of Abel, had it really been the dictate of his own unassisted will? Had the firstlings of Abel’s flock been slaughtered at God’s altar, without a direct and positive command for such a sacrifice, would not Abel’s arm, like that of Uzzah, have been stretched forth to slaughter them without authority? And would not Abel, like Nadab and Abihu, have offered that before the Lord which the Lord commanded him not? And would not then his act of will-worship, like

^a 2 Sam. vi. 6, 7.

their's, háve called down the vengeance, rather than the approbation of the Deity? We think not, because the circumstances of the cases are materially different. When Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord, it was after another fire had been provided by God himself for their use, and after he had commanded that "the fire should ever be burning upon the altar, and should never go out^a." When Uzzah was visited for having presumed to support the tottering ark, it was because, as a Levite, he ought to have borne it with his own and his brethren's strength, and thus have prevented the danger into which, from being dragged by oxen, it had fallen. In both these cases, therefore, there was a positive irreverence in the act, and in both, the individuals, who were the objects of God's wrath, had the light of a previous revelation which might have taught them the impropriety of the conduct they pursued. But Abel, so far as we can perceive, had no revelation to teach him the mode in which he should worship the Almighty ; and if his reason or imagination suggested to him an offering of the firstlings of his flock, as the most acceptable and reasonable service his piety could present, we may call it a species of will-worship if we choose, but we never can consider it as an act blameable or irre-

^a Levit. vi. 13.

verent, nor ever fairly compare it with the acts of Nadab and Abihu, and Uzzah. In fact, it would seem always to require the existence of a previous communication of God's will, before any act of will-worship can be justly censured with severity. We condemn, without hesitation, the deluded disciple of Popery for his "voluntary humility and worshipping of angels" and images, and we feel that our condemnation is merited and right. For the Papist, like every other believer in Jesus, has the principles of the Gospel before his view, from which, if he had chosen to be instructed, he might have learnt a better and a holier object of worship. We cannot, therefore, but blame his "shew of wisdom in will-worship," and his presumption in "intruding into things which he has not seen^a," because it implies a desire to be wise, at least above, if not contrary to what is written, and to make that worship which is "after the commandments and doctrines of men," of equal avail with those services which have been ordained by the Almighty himself. But when we turn to the misguided acts of devotion upon which the unenlightened Indian is taught to depend for salvation, it is with very different feelings and thoughts. When we behold him emaciating his body, and distorting his limbs, and inflicting

^a Col. ii. 18, 23.

upon himself every varied suffering which a superstitious imagination can suggest; and when we find him resting on these vain services as expiating his crimes, or recommending him to the favour of his God, we regret his blindness, more than we condemn his wilfulness. If he be sincere in devotion, and righteous as far as his religious knowledge extends, we pity his errors, but never for a moment think of placing him in the same rank with the Papist, who presumptuously deforms the beauty of that holiness he has been taught, by inventions and perversions of his own. There is, therefore, a manifest difference between the voluntary services of those who add without authority to a system of religion they have already received, and those who only endeavour to supply the want of such a system by the suggestions of their own reason and piety. What is presumptuous in the one is reverential in the other; and to this latter class the service of Abel belongs. The acceptance, therefore, of his animal sacrifice by God, does not necessarily imply that God had previously commanded such an offering to be made; because it is very possible that if it was a reasonable service, and offered in the sincerity of devotion, it might have been acceptable, although only the spontaneous dictate of his religious feelings.

II. Such are the usual arguments by which it has been attempted to infer from the narrative of Moses, that sacrifices had been instituted by God before Cain and Abel brought their respective offerings. They are arguments, however, which are so far from being conclusive upon the point, that they do not even afford presumptive evidence of any considerable weight. Let us proceed, therefore, in the next place, to examine whether a divine command for the practice of animal sacrifices immediately after the fall, may not be gathered from circumstances independent of the book of Genesis. The circumstances generally referred to for this purpose, are three: first, the universal prevalence of animal offerings; secondly, the declaration of St. Paul, that Abel's offering was made acceptable by his faith; and, thirdly, the alleged impossibility of accounting for the origin of animal and bloody sacrifices from the unassisted dictates of reason alone.

1. Now, in examining the first of these circumstances, we must undoubtedly allow, that the universal prevalence of animal sacrifices, forms one of the most remarkable features in the religious history of man. In every age and every nation of the world, ignorant or enlightened, the same shedding of a victim's blood is found to have been adopted and relied upon as a mode

of conciliating an offended, or pleasing a propitious, or acknowledging the dependence of the offerer upon the power and kindness of a protecting Deity. Some common origin there must, therefore, necessarily have been for this invariable uniformity of religious rites; and, as it would be unnatural to conceive that the reason of the most distant and dissimilar nations should have uniformly conducted them to the very same mode of worshipping the God whom they adored, we must, of course, look for that origin in some period which preceded the first general dispersion of the human race. Thus much the universal prevalence of animal sacrifices undeniably implies; but we press the matter too closely, and we make a conclusion far too positive and precise, when we pronounce the uniformity of the practice to have been founded upon a divine command. The general notion of the acceptableness of sacrifices, certainly proves the general acquaintance of mankind with some fact, which unequivocally demonstrated the approbation of God to such a mode of approaching his presence and his altar; but it does not certainly prove that the reason of that approbation was the obedience of the worshipper to a divine injunction. If we can discover among the earlier records of the human race, the history of some transaction which tradition might have handed down to every

succeeding age, and in which the sanction of Heaven to the practice of sacrifices of blood, was distinctly and solemnly displayed, we have at once done all that is necessary to account for the universality of that religious ordinance without resorting to any assumed command, from God. Now such a transaction may easily be found in the proceedings of Noah when he came forth from the ark. Impressed with the wonders of his salvation from the flood, and conscious of his unworthiness of the least of the mercies he had received, Noah removed the covering of the ark and went forth, and “builded an altar unto the Lord, and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake. While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. And God blessed Noah and his sons^a.” Of the solemnity of this rite, and the solemnity of its acceptance by Jehovah, it was impossible that the sons of Noah could have been either ignorant or unmindful. The blessing, and the sacrifice which called down the blessing, would naturally be fixed in their own thoughts, and communicated to

^a Gen. viii. 20, 21, 22, and ix. 1.

their posterity, and in every future exigence mankind would naturally recur to the same means of obtaining favour with the God of all power and goodness. In this course, therefore, we find the Patriarchs persevering, and this course was also pursued by each of the other families by whom the whole earth was divided after the flood. In the sanction then by which these burnt-offerings of Noah were so pre-eminently honoured, and in the force and authority of his example, we find an easy and satisfactory account of the origin of a similar custom in every nation of the world; and why, with this plain and simple explanation of their prevalence before our view, we should unnecessarily presume that they were founded upon the tradition of a positive command for the practice, when no such command can be found, seems difficult to conceive. The tradition of this fact is fully sufficient for the purpose, and cannot be denied. The supposition of a divine command is at least doubtful, and consequently can never be urged to the satisfaction of a sceptical mind. The universality, therefore, of the practice of sacrifices, affords no additional argument for their original institution by God after the fall. The prevalence of the rite, the sameness of the manner, and the merit attributed to their use, may be referred with equal justice, and still greater propriety to another and undoubted

source,—to the sacrifice of the second universal father of mankind and to the signal blessing and approbation which that sacrifice obtained.

2. But of all the arguments independent of the book of Genesis, which have been produced for the original institution of animal sacrifices by God, that which is deduced from the words of St. Paul, appears to be possessed of by far the most plausibility and force. For does not that Apostle say that “by faith Abel offered a more excellent and acceptable sacrifice than Cain?” “In ^alike manner then as Noah, Abraham, *and the rest* are represented by the same Apostle as acting in consequence of a divine command, placing an entire reliance in the promise of him who commanded; so Abel, in the sacrifice which he offered, must be supposed to have acted under the same impression, believing what God had promised, and therefore sacrificing what God had ordered.” Here it is assumed that every individual who is praised for his faith in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, demonstrated their faith by an obedience to some positive command. Now if this could be fully proved; if it could ever be clearly shewn that *all* those individuals whom the Apostle describes “as actuated by the divine principle of faith,

^a Magee on Atonement, Vol. II. p. 224.

rendered themselves thus renowned by a belief of something declared, and in consequence of such belief the performance of some action enjoined them by God^a," I know not how we could resist the inference which has been drawn. But such is very far indeed from being a true representation of the case. Noah, no doubt, "being warned of God prepared the ark" which God had commanded him to prepare. Abraham, no doubt, when called to go into a strange land, "by faith obeyed the call," and went into the land into which God had commanded him to go. But of the rest of the faithful who are praised, it is certain that many acted without any command having been specially given to direct their proceedings. Thus "by faith Moses, when he was come to years," and had time and understanding to reflect upon the duties which belonged to his station, "refused" any longer "to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;" though we know of no divine command that he should refuse to be so called. Thus "by faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not when," without any special injunction from God, "she received the spies in peace." Jephthah too is accounted amongst those who were distinguished by their faith; though most assuredly his rash vow was uttered without any direct or divine

^a Kennicott's Two Dissertations, p. 213.

command. At any rate, therefore, the assertion that faith was the ground of the acceptance of Abel's offering, does not necessarily imply any pre-existing divine institution of sacrifice.

But not only is this assertion of St. Paul an inconclusive argument for the existence of a previous command from God for the practice of sacrifices of blood. If we consider carefully the manner in which he has reasoned with regard to Enoch, we shall perceive that the faith of Abel may more naturally be inferred from the mere respect which was shewn to his offering, than from his obedience to a pre-existing institution. For of Enoch the Apostle observes, that "by faith he was translated that he should not see death ; and was not found because God had translated him : for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him^a." In other words ; since Enoch was translated because he pleased God ; and since without faith it is impossible to please him, it necessarily follows, that Enoch was translated because of his faith. His faith, therefore, is to be deduced from the fact of his translation. Such is the argument with regard to Enoch, and from the manner in which the same writer has just before spoken of Abel, it does

^a Heb. xi. 5, 6.

certainly seem highly probable that he intended a similar course of argument to be applied to him. For of Abel, as of Enoch, he says, that he “obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts^a.” But without pleasing God it is impossible to obtain witness from him that we are righteous; and “without faith it is impossible to please him.” Consequently, as the faith of Enoch is to be inferred from the mere fact of his translation, so may the faith of Abel be, in like manner, deduced from the mere acceptableness of his sacrifice to God. The works of Cain, then, were wicked, because desecrated by infidelity, and he was rejected, because through unbelief he had not done well. His brother, on the other hand, through belief had done well, and his works were righteous because mixed up with faith: and both this faith and this want of it, may be proved from the different manner in which the two offerings were received.

So far then every thing is clear; and though it is not explicitly stated, either by Moses or St. Paul, in what respect the faith of Abel was superior to that of Cain, and whether in nature or degree, yet neither can this be regarded as a matter of much difficulty to determine. Doubtless,

^a Gen. iv. 4.

besides a general belief in the proposition that "God is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him," a proposition which seems to have been held by both the brothers in common, we may fairly suppose, that the faith of Abel comprehended also a firm reliance upon all the promises and revelations which had hitherto proceeded from God, and, consequently, a belief in that particular promise which assigned to the seed of the woman the office of crushing the serpent's head. For whilst we deny that the faith of *all* the worthies enumerated by St. Paul was displayed by their obedience to some special command, we freely admit that they *all* acted in that manner which they believed would be most acceptable, and founded their actions and belief upon some pre-existing revelation or promise. Thus "by faith Sarah received strength to conceive; because she judged him faithful, who had promised" that she should be "delivered of a child when she was past age^a." Thus "by faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel, and gave commandment concerning his bones^b," in a steady belief that God would fulfil his promise and put the descendants of Jacob in possession of their appointed inheritance. Thus also "by faith did Rahab receive the spies in peace,"

^a Heb. xi. 11.

^b Ibid. xi. 22.

believing that the Israelites would obtain that victory which God had promised them over the inhabitants of Canaan : and thus shall we find in every instance of faith alluded to by St. Paul, that there was a distinct belief in some preceding promise or revelation, either of a particular kind, as in the cases already detailed, or of a more general nature, as in the faith of Enoch. Since then it is certain that the promise of a redemption and a Redeemer had been already communicated to man, and that even before the sacrifice of Abel he had received a revelation of a future deliverance, we are directly and undeniably authorised to assert that it was for his faith in that peculiar and benevolent declaration of God's will, a faith as clear as the obscurity of the terms of the promise allowed, and as full and firm as the nature of the case required, that " the Lord had respect unto him and to his offering." And from the same principles we as clearly infer on the other hand, that " unto Cain and to his offering the Lord had not respect," because he was deficient or devoid of that excellent gift. The Deist may ridicule the principles upon which this solution is founded if he will ; but he cannot deny that they are principles distinctly laid down by revelation. He may deride the merit of faith as a reason of man's acceptableness in the sight of his Creator, and refuse to yield his assent to the proposition

that "without faith it is impossible to please God." Upon this ground we fear not his objections, and we are ready to meet him whenever the occasion seems to demand the discussion; but our present object requires not that we should enter into so large a field of doctrinal investigation. Our only object at present is to shew that the respect with which the offering of Abel was received is not a circumstance upon which any argument can be founded against the internal credibility of the book in which it is found. It cannot, we maintain, be considered as inconsistent either with the dictates of reason, or the attributes of the Deity, or the general tenor of revelation; because the approbation of God was not bestowed upon Abel on account of the sanguinary nature of his sacrifice, or any frivolous or arbitrary distinction, but on account of a great and estimable religious qualification which he possessed. It was because he was endued with that virtue of faith, which, from the beginning to the end of revelation is almost beyond all others conspicuous in the Saints, and laid down as an indispensable requisite for obtaining the favour of God. This we have already shewn by proving first that the narrative of Moses undeniably implies that the offering of Abel was accepted and approved because he had done well; and then, by demonstrating, in the method pointed out to us by

St. Paul, that the qualification which entitled him to that character was his religious faith, the very quality in which Enoch was translated, through which Noah was saved, for which Abraham was blessed, and by which the Christian is justified. At least, then, the Deist must allow that Abel's offering was not accepted for any improper reason, but in exact conformity with the general representations of Scripture upon the means by which men incur the displeasure, or win the favour of the Almighty. The respect, therefore, which was shewn to the sacrifice of this faithful man, and the preference he obtained over the less faithful Cain, can never be condemned as inconsistent with the wisdom and holiness of God, or as unworthy to be recorded in a divine revelation until it has first of all been proved that the doctrine of our acceptance through faith is either irrational or unrighteous. But irrational it never can be proved, so long as it is allowed that our conduct is materially affected by the nature of the principles we embrace; nor unrighteous, so long as we hold that "faith without works is dead," and exhort every man to "add virtue to his faith," and shew forth the soundness of his belief by the fruits of righteousness in his life.

Such are the observations we would urge

upon those who would falsely assert that the preference shewn to Abel was an arbitrary and unfounded preference, or with equal injustice insinuate that it was the cruelty of his offering which made him acceptable to God. Such are the arguments by which we would endeavour to convince them of the injustice of the censures which, whether in poetry or prose, they have so often urged against the Scriptures as stigmatising the Lord of all mercy as delighting only in the sanguinary services of his creatures, and as capable of being appeased by no shrine without a victim, and no altar without gore. Such also are the arguments by which we would endeavour to prove that St. Paul did not intend, by referring the acceptance of Abel to his faith, to imply that sacrifices of atonement by blood had already been instituted by God. If then that opinion is still to be maintained it must be maintained upon the ground of the impossibility of accounting for the origin of animal sacrifices by reason alone, which is the last of those circumstances which have been urged in defence of the supposition of a divine command for such offerings. The examination of this point will, consequently form the subject of the next Discourse, in which I shall bring this lengthened discussion to a close, by endeavouring to establish the two following positions. First,

that considering the circumstances in which Abel stood, an offering “of the firstlings of his flock” was neither an unnatural nor an unreasonable service: and secondly, that considering the recorded declarations of the Almighty to our first parents after their transgression, such an offering was, perhaps, the most proper method he could adopt of demonstrating his faith in the promise of some future deliverance from the consequences of the fall.

LECTURE XII.

THE OFFERINGS OF CAIN AND ABEL,
AND THE
ORIGIN OF SACRIFICES CONSIDERED.

PART III.

HEB. XI. 4.

“ By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and by it he, being dead, yet speaketh.”

FAMILIARIZED to the idea of an atonement of blood for sin, and believing the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross to have been the propitiation and satisfaction to God for the transgressions of the whole human race; beholding the Christian sacrifice typified in every ordinance, and every offering under the Mosaic law, and certain that the death of the Messiah was fore-ordained for our redemption from the very beginning of the world, some eminent theologians have piously conceived that animal sacrifices must also, from the very beginning of the world, have been instituted and commanded by God himself, as direct prefigurations of this last and all-sufficient oblation.

Others, again, have been induced to maintain the divine appointment of animal sacrifices after the fall, as the best mode of accounting for the preference which was shewn to the offering of Abel ; others, lest they should seem to countenance the will-worship of the Papists ; and others, under the notion that this opinion would better enable them to refute the objections of the Socinian against the doctrine of the efficacy of Christ's death as a sacrifice for sin.

Such are some of the various motives which have induced theologians to embrace and defend this idea with so much zeal, under so many disadvantages, and by arguments which, so far from approaching to a solid proof, do not even appear to afford a strong presumption in favour of the existence of any command from God for the general practice of sacrifices as a religious rite, before the promulgation of the Mosaic law.

The truth of this assertion with regard to many of the arguments advanced, has already been established. We have shewn that there is no reason to suppose that a divine command for animal sacrifices after the fall, if given, was omitted by Moses. We have also shewn that neither can the existence of such a command at that early period be fairly or satisfactorily inferred

from his narrative. Lastly, we entered upon the consideration of those circumstances, exclusive and independent of the Mosaic history, in which the primitive and divine appointment of animal offerings is supposed to be implied, and found that neither the universal prevalence of sacrifices, nor the declaration of St. Paul, that “by faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain,” can be made of any avail to prove the disputed point. But there remains yet another circumstance to be examined, from which the same conclusion has been attempted to be drawn; and that is, the alleged absurdity of sacrifices in the eye of reason, and their alleged inhumanity in the eye of nature. This is indeed one of the most favourite arguments of the defenders of the divine appointment of sacrifices after the fall, and scarce any terms seem sufficiently strong to express their opinion of the cruelty and irrationality of animal offerings. By some the offerings both of Abel and of Cain are represented as almost equally unaccountable; and it is asserted that “unprejudiced reason never could have dictated, that destroying the best of our fruits and creatures could be an office acceptable to God, but quite the contrary^a.” Others, whilst they seem to allow that the vegetable offering of Cain might indeed be the result of rational deductions alone, yet maintain that no such ad-

^a Delaney's Rev. Examined, vol. I. p. 125.

mission can be allowed with regard to the animal sacrifice of Abel. They hold “that no reasonable notions of God could teach men that he could delight in blood, or in the fat of slain beasts^a.” They speak of “the destruction of innocent and useful creatures as against nature, against reason, and against interest^b,” and condemn it as “an action, than which, nothing could be more, in appearance, ill-fitted to appease the divine wrath, or obtain the divine favour^c.” Censures like these might appear to most men to have been more than enough to mark the sentiments of these divines. But one, still more zealous than the rest, has completed the climax, by, first of all, implying that to take away the lives of innocent and inoffensive creatures, to put them to torture, to spill their blood, and burn their flesh upon the altar of God, is alike contrary to the mercy, and lenity, and compassion of that infinite Being.—He then concludes, that thus to torture them, and take away their lives, would, “without God’s positive injunction, have been an abominable act, and enough to desecrate all their oblations^d.” Such is the injudicious language of these divines. I call this language injudicious, because, by asserting in terms so strong and unguarded the absurdity

^a Magee on Atonement, vol. II. p. 73. 3d edit.

^b Ibid. copied from Delaney, vol. I. p. 128.

^c Delaney, vol. I. p. 134.

^d Stackhouse’s Hist. of the Bible, vol. I. p. 77. fol.

and inhumanity of animal sacrifices in themselves, and the impossibility of rationally regarding them as atonements for sin, the difficulty of vindicating the Mosaic sacrifices as types of the great sacrifice of the cross, and the sacrifice of the cross as the means of reconciliation to God, is increased to an alarming degree. If “the *natural* unfitness of the sacrificial rite to obtain the divine favour, and the *total* incongruity between the killing of God’s creatures, and the receiving a pardon for the violation of God’s laws^a,” be so very manifest; if the doctrine of the shedding of blood for the remission of sins, be indeed, not only above, but contrary to reason, then must we admit that there is far more force in the objections of the Socinian and the Deist, than, if it were merely an inexplicable doctrine, we should be at all compelled to allow.

It must be confessed, however, that all the advocates of the positive institution of animal sacrifices after the fall, have not been equally sweeping in their condemnations, and that even the most violent have sometimes taken a less decided tone. In their more sober moments they merely assert, “that no being has any right to the lives of the creatures, but their Creator, or those on whom he confers that right: and that,” when Abel

^a Magee, vol. II. p. 70.

brought the firstlings of his flock, "God had not yet given man a right to the creatures, even for necessary food^a." Such are their premises, and the conclusion which they deduce from these premises is this: that as "no permission had yet been given to eat animal food, and no" other "pretext could possibly have presented itself to the mind of man for taking away the life of the creatures of God, it is irreconcilable that, by any deductions of unassisted reason, the mind" of Abel "could have arrived at the conclusion that to destroy a part of the creation could be agreeable to the Creator; much less that it could be viewed as an act of homage^b." And if it be impossible to imagine how the faith or understanding of Abel could have led him to an animal sacrifice as a rational or innocent mode of religious worship, it must be equally impossible to suppose that God would have vouchsafed to approve and sanction it as an acceptable service. Since then we know both that Abel offered, and that God had respect unto his animal offering, we must necessarily conclude, that as such an offering could neither have been made nor accepted as the dictate of reason alone, it must have been suggested to him by the positive revelation of God.

^a Delaney, vol. I. p. 132.

^b See an "Essay on the Religion of the Indian Tribes of North America," by Dr. Jarvis, inserted in the Investigator, No. 5, July, 1821, p. 75.

Such is the argument when temperately stated and viewed: but it is an argument which, however correct its premises, and however powerful when applied to the believer, can have but little influence upon the mind of the sceptic or the infidel; because the divine institution of sacrifices does not necessarily follow from its admission. There are three sources at least from which it is conceivable that the practice of sacrifices of blood may have been derived; reason, revelation, and superstition. Whilst the sceptic, therefore, agrees with these divines in the impossibility of accounting for the origin of animal offerings from the principles of reason alone, the inference which he will deduce from that admission will differ materially from their's. He will only infer that as they did not originate in reason, they must have been the suggestion either of superstition or a divine command; and maintaining that the existence of a divine command for their institution cannot be satisfactorily, or even plausibly proved, he will insist upon superstition as their proper and only parent, and thus gain an advantage in objecting to the whole doctrine of sacrifice for sin, which it would be most unwise, and, I cannot but think, unnecessary to allow him to enjoy.

At once, therefore, to deprive the adversary of the atonement of this advantage, and to dis-

prove the assertion of the advocates for the divine institution of sacrificial atonement after the fall, I shall now proceed in an endeavour to shew, that the reason of Abel might easily have suggested to him the practice of animal sacrifice as an act of grateful piety, without any specific command for that purpose; and that, in consequence, as his service was a rational service, the faith with which he was endued justly obtained from God a respect both to himself and to his offering. I will endeavour to shew that, taking into our view the circumstances of the dispensation under which our first parents were placed after the fall, the offering up of their flocks as well as their fruits became a natural and a proper mode of religious worship: in a word, that, taking for granted the truth of what is actually related in Genesis, the origin of sacrifice is not altogether unaccountable on the principles of reason and nature, and that there is therefore no necessity whatever for resorting to the hypothesis of a divine command, of which we have neither any traces in the Mosaic narrative, nor any proof from any other source.

Now it is evident that the whole force of the argument in support of the unreasonableness of animal sacrifices, if not sanctioned by a divine command, rests upon the supposition, first, that

Abel had no justifiable pretext for taking away the life of any of the sentient creatures of the Almighty; and secondly, that even if he could have deemed the deprivation of their life innocent, he could never have imagined that the offering of the slain victim would be received as an acceptable mode of worship. These, therefore, are the points we must examine; and if we can shew that men had already been authorised to put to death the firstlings of their flocks for a specific and useful purpose, and that the offerings of the animals so authorised to be slain, would appear a natural acknowledgement of gratitude to the Being who had devoted them to man's service, and subjected them to man's power; if these two propositions can be fairly established, we shall feel but little difficulty in admitting that the reason of Abel might alone have led him to an animal sacrifice.

1. Upon the first of these points it is to be observed, that if we turn to the book of Genesis, we shall find, that no sooner had the Deity reproved and pronounced the sentence upon our first parents after their transgression, than it is immediately written, that "unto Adam and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins and clothed them^a." That the animals, from whose

^a Gen. iii. 21.

bodies the covering of man was thus taken, had fallen a prey to the power of death in the ordinary course of nature and decay, will scarce be maintained by any who reflect, that nature had not hitherto been subject to any course of decay, and that the power of death had only just been introduced with the power of sin into the world. It has been, therefore, more generally asserted by those who conceive that sacrifices had already been instituted by God, that they were the skins of those animals which had been slain in sacrifice, of which this particular use was made. But the defence of this opinion involves the very subject upon which we are at issue. It supposes that early and divine institution of sacrifices, about which we are disputing, to have been already proved, or at least to be capable of sufficient and satisfactory proof from some other source independent of the argument on which we are now employed. This, however, as we have seen in our previous examination of the sources from which such proof is attempted to be drawn, is by no means the case. Nor is this the only disadvantage under which the opinion labours. For it is asserted by none, that sacrifices, if appointed by God at all before the flood, were appointed before the sentence pronounced upon our first parents. It appears, however, from the narrative of Moses, that the appropriation of the

covering of animals for the raiment of man took place, if not at the very time, yet immediately subsequent to the denunciation of death as the penalty of the original transgression. Hence it is evident, that the institution of animal offerings, and the clothing of the human body must have been almost, if not exactly contemporaneous events; and that, consequently, the skins which were taken for this purpose, must have been the skins of almost, if not the very first creatures which were slain in sacrifice. But is it not then most singular, if sacrifices and the clothing of man were appointed together, that Moses, whilst relating so carefully the appointment of the one, should have been altogether silent upon that of the other, when that other was not only of at least equal importance, but also both a simultaneous and connected circumstance? Or, if we only suppose them to have been appointed nearly about the same time, is not the omission still equally singular? For, in this case, an alteration must be assumed to have been made in the ordinance of sacrifice, after its original institution. The skin, which together with the rest of the victim, was at first offered up as a whole burnt-offering unto the Lord, must now be conceived to have been afterwards separated for the use of man, and the body alone to have been consumed upon the altar. The

difficulty of maintaining that Moses omitted to mention the original institution of sacrifice is thus considerably increased; and we have to assume, not only that he omitted the divine command by which the rite was established, but also the authority by which the mode of its celebration was changed. Upon the whole, therefore, it is not only so much more simple to suppose that these animals were slain for the very purpose of affording covering to man, but it also occurs so unavoidably to the mind of every ordinary reader, as the natural inference from the words, that I cannot but consider it as the true conclusion; more especially when the objections to any other mode of interpretation are duly weighed. Here then, if the representation we have given of the matter be at all correct, we may perceive that Abel had indeed a justifiable pretext for taking away animal life; certainly not for sustenance, but yet for another special and scarce less essential purpose. In fact, as God by his word had before allowed to him the destruction of the fruits of the earth for necessary food, so did he now by his own solemn act, sanction to him the destruction of living and sentient creatures for his necessary raiment. For "we are here told, that *God made these coats* for them; that is, he gave them leave to kill the animals, and perhaps direction how

to adapt their skin to the parts of their bodies : for it is certain, that God is frequently said to *do* that, which is *done by his order* and approbation." Such is the observation even of Kennicott^a himself, and how, after such an admission, he came to adopt the opinion that the slaying of the animals was for sacrifice, and not for the more obvious end of clothing our first parents, it is difficult to explain, without referring it to his pre-conceived notions of a divine command for the institution of the rite at the fall. The only direct argument by which he has attempted to establish his opinion, is the assertion, that "it may be presumed, God would not have given" man permission to destroy his creatures only for the purpose of raiment, "when there were yet so few creatures in the world^b." But besides the assumption of the fewness of the creatures which is here so confidently, yet without authority, laid down, it will be still more hard, if the creatures were indeed so few, to account for their being appointed to be slain for sacrifice ; which by its frequent repetition, would occasion a still more rapid diminution of animal life, than the clothing of man could possibly, in that early state of society, have required.

2. Having now seen that Abel had not only

^a Two Dissertations, p. 69.

^b Ibid. p. 70.

a justifiable pretext, but an undoubted authority to destroy animal life for raiment, we must in the next place proceed to examine whether, considering that to be the case, he could reasonably suppose an offering of the animal so destroyed, would be accepted as a religious service by the Being who had given him the authority. Upon this point, however, if we regard his offering as merely of an eucharistical nature, we shall feel, I apprehend, but little serious difficulty. If, indeed, we choose to call and to explain all eucharistical sacrifices as *gifts*, and if, interpreting gifts in the sense which the word usually bears when adopted in the ordinary transactions of common life, we choose still further to assert, that "they carry with them the idea of a *bribe* to God," we no doubt advance what is both true in itself, and decisive against their propriety in that particular sense. But when, instead of speaking of such sacrifices as gifts, we omit the ambiguous word, and speak of them only as offerings before the Lord, and as acts expressive of the gratitude of the offerer for some benefit he has received, the vegetable sacrifice of Cain, and the animal sacrifice of Abel, are then placed upon the same footing, and may be alike accounted for upon the principles of reason alone. For doubtless we are bound not only to be grateful in our hearts, but also to

express it by our lips, and to accompany our words by corresponding actions: and doubtless we are bound to pursue this conduct in acknowledgement of every kind of blessing, whether of raiment or of food. Since, therefore, it is generally and justly allowed^a that Cain might be led, by the mere principles of nature, to bring an offering of the produce of the earth as an acknowledgement of the divine goodness in appointing to him the fruits of the ground for food, it must be allowed also that the same reasoning might lead Abel to bring an offering of the firstlings of his flock as an acknowledgement of the divine goodness in appointing to him their skins for raiment. In this manner it is easy to conceive, that animal sacrifices would then appear neither an unnatural nor an irrational mode of testifying a grateful sense of a blessing so specially and singularly conferred, though to us they are no longer even an innocent service. As Christians, we have embraced a religion which, by the positive and superior precepts of revelation, has superseded the exercise of reason in devising the forms of outward godliness. We live under a Gospel which, by prohibiting all further oblations of victims from the hands, has reduced the offices of piety to the mere spiritual offerings

^a See Kennicott's Two Dissertations, p. 200.

of the heart and lips^a. But before any peculiar form of worship had been either forbidden or prescribed, and before the vanity of all other sacrifices had been proclaimed, and their propriety terminated in the final sacrifice of the cross, it is neither difficult to conceive that reason should have prompted an offering of every thing from which benefit was derived, nor irreverent to suppose that God would accept such offerings as one of the most unequivocal testimonies of a sense of gratitude and dependence. As God, therefore, had actually provided man with raiment by the destruction of animal life, the destruction of animal life in the presence of the Lord, and the presentation of the slain victim upon his altar in return, became one of the most natural modes of expressing gratitude for the means appointed for the communication of one great necessary of life. It was at once an innocent, a pious, and an appropriate act of homage.

Thus have we examined the only remaining argument of those who assert the divine institution of sacrifices immediately after the fall,

^a I have added these remarks, because some have been weak enough to argue, that if sacrifices were a reasonable mode of worship in the Patriarchal ages and under the Mosaic law, their practice must be equally proper under the Christian dispensation. Hence they infer, that as sacrifices would now be deemed an irrational service, they never could have been otherwise.

and proved it to be equally inconclusive with the rest. When we consider the circumstances in which Abel stood, it appears that an offering of the "firstlings of his flock," is not inexplicable upon the mere principles of reason and piety alone. Consequently it is not necessary to suppose that he acted in obedience to the positive command of God, in order to account for his having adopted that peculiar mode of worship. Neither is it at all more necessary to call in the aid of such a supposition to relieve us from the alleged impossibility of accounting, upon any just grounds, for the divine preference of the offering of Abel instead of that of Cain. The reasonableness of the former has appeared, in the progress of our investigation, to be as clear as that of the latter, and the sentiment of gratitude, seeking every appropriate method of expressing itself, whether by actions or by words, has been found, upon enquiry, to explain and to justify both the bloody sacrifice of Abel, and the bloodless sacrifice of Cain. For the two great and most comprehensive blessings we enjoy, are those of food and raiment, and we have shewn that, whilst the one of these two brothers was offering up a natural service of praise and thanksgiving for the appointed means of sustenance, the other was doing the same for the appointed means of clothing. The reason-

ableness therefore of Abel's service, when aided and sanctified by the righteousness of his person through that faith and holiness in which Cain was deficient, afford a just and intelligible foundation for the superior respect with which both himself and his offering were received. Had his offering been contrary to reason and repugnant to nature, no doubt it would have been difficult, however pre-eminent his holiness or faith, not only to explain how his understanding could have been led to adopt it as a mode of religious worship, but also to suppose that God would have accepted and sanctioned it when brought. But the moment we perceive that this act of homage had its foundation not in a superstitious, but a rational piety, every objection vanishes, and the whole becomes capable of a sound and satisfactory defence. It was right to prefer the reasonable service of righteous Abel, before the reasonable service of unrighteous Cain.


The difficulties of the question being thus removed, and the hypothesis of the divine appointment of sacrifices having been shewn to be both unsupported and unnecessary, we might now quit the subject. It is impossible, however, to forbear the addition of a few incidental remarks, which seem to render it by no means improbable, that the faith of Abel in a deliverance from the conse-

quences of the fall was, in some degree, demonstrated by his offering itself. For it is evident that the destruction of animal life was made or directed by God for the very purpose of obviating that sense of shame and nakedness which was one of the first and most melancholy effects of transgression. To hide their shame our first parents had already resorted to an expedient of their own invention. But no sooner had God denounced upon them the sentence of certain, and relieved them, by the promise of some final and remarkable triumph over their adversary, from the dreadfulness of eternal death, than he superseded their own imperfect efforts to obviate the consequences of their sin, by shedding immediately the blood of the animal creation, in order to supply them with a different and a better mode of effecting the same end. It is by no means unnatural, therefore, to imagine that Abel, in bringing “of the firstlings of his flock,” had a reference to these several considerations; and that the gratitude which he expressed by his offering for the raiment with which he had been clothed, was more especially a gratitude for the means of removing that sense of moral shame he experienced in his nakedness, together with a reliance upon the contemporaneous promise of a future and more complete emancipation from the evils of the fall. And if this should be once allowed it is easy to perceive how

his faith was signified by his offering, and, consequently, in what sense the Apostle more peculiarly intended to declare that "by faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain."

But whatever be the opinion we form with respect to the sentiments of Abel himself, we can scarce doubt that God in this action, and Moses in introducing his account of the mode in which raiment was thus provided for man, had a peculiar view to the manner of our redemption, through the death of Christ. For nothing is more remarkable than the frequency of those passages in scripture, by which the pardon of transgression is represented under the metaphor of *hiding* or of *covering* sin. Nor can it escape the recollection of any that the skin of the victim was reserved, in the Mosaic ritual, for the priest who was the medium of atonement. It cannot, therefore, be considered as a position altogether unreasonable to maintain, that the method of obviating the natural consequences of the fall, by the shedding of blood, was intended to be viewed by us, who live when the scheme of redemption has been completed, as having some connection with that more effectual shedding of blood by which God had, as we know, from the very foundation of the world, determined to cover also all our spiritual nakedness and shame. For in both instances it is the Lord

God who himself interposes for our good, and in the latter, as in the former, a raiment of righteousness is appointed for our acceptance and use, more excellent than any we had provided for ourselves. It is not necessary, indeed, to view the subject in this light: for the introduction of the fact "that the Lord made coats of skins, and clothed them," may be defended even in its ordinary and more unimportant sense. But when we regard it in combination with the other circumstances I have noticed, it seems to assume a more definite character, and there appears to be a reason for its introduction which makes it not unworthy of being thus pressed upon our attention.



LECTURE XIII.

NOAH'S CURSE UPON CANAAN.

GEN. IX. 22, 24, 25.

“Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without . . . And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. . . . And he said, Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”

FROM the acceptance of the offering of Abel, and the rejection of that of Cain, the grounds and reasons of which have been discussed in the preceding Lectures, I pass immediately to the history of the *post-diluvian* world. Not but that there are several other individuals and incidents in the *ante-diluvian* world, both important and obscure enough to excite curiosity and demand explanation ; but the extreme brevity of this portion of the Mosaic records, comprehending in the limited space of little more than seven Chapters the events of above sixteen hundred years, and the great difference which probably subsisted between the religious and political state of mankind before and after the deluge, must ever prevent our forming any precise objections or giving

them any distinct and certain answer. There are, however, some things of great consequence which preceded the flood, recorded at full length by Moses, and upon which, therefore, a more intelligible opinion might be produced. Such are the creation, the fall, and the flood. But the difficulties attending the creation and the flood, are principally of a physical nature, whilst the fall of man, though intimately connected with the attributes of the Deity, yet seems more naturally to be united with the redemption and sacrifice of Christ, and, consequently, to belong more properly to the department of *doctrinal* difficulties.

Proceeding, therefore, to the history of the post-diluvian world, the first account we meet with, is that of the patriarchal periods and individuals, when the governors of men were rather the heads of families than the rulers of nations. This portion of history extends from the deluge to the death of Joseph; for the anomalous interval during which the children of Israel were in bondage to the kings of Egypt, who knew not Joseph, and which terminated in their being placed under the dispensation of the Mosaic law, can scarce be regarded as belonging either to the age of the Patriarchs, or that of the Theocracy. It is rather a link between the two.

Now one of the first acts of the very first of these Patriarchs affords matter of considerable difficulty and discussion. Escaped from the perils of those mighty waters in which all the rest of an unbelieving generation had been overwhelmed, Noah, in the piety of gratitude “built an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar.” God, therefore, blessed Noah and his sons, and established his covenant with them, and their seed after them for perpetual generations. Thus loaded with the remembrance of the former, and the sense of the present loving-kindness of the Lord, Noah resumed the labours of ordinary life, and “began to be an husbandman, and planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and was drunken.” With the freshness of unequalled mercies on his head, and the sound of an irrevocable promise of their perpetuity in his ears, he had no sooner gathered of the fruits of his increase, than he abused the gracious restoration of the gifts of nature. Whilst thus overcome with wine he lay unconsciously asleep, and “uncovered in his tent; Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father; and he told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness.

And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant."

Several questions are pressed upon us, as arising out of this transaction. Whence this early fall of a Patriarch so holy as Noah, and so lately displaying an instance of pious gratitude to his preserver? Wherein consisted the great iniquity of Ham, that it should be so severely visited upon Canaan; and why, if Ham deserved punishment at all, was it not denounced against himself rather than his innocent posterity? Wherein also consisted the great merit of Shem and Japheth, that they should obtain so signal a blessing for the mere performance of a duty? And why, as the conduct of both, so far as we can perceive, was precisely the same, was any difference made in the recompence they received? Thus the origin and extent of Noah's transgression; the nature of his son's guilt; the propriety of selecting Canaan as the particular object upon whom the evil was pronounced; together with the merit of Shem and Japheth, and the reason of their

being distinguished in the terms of Noah's blessing ;—these are the several points to which we are necessarily to direct our attention. When they have all been duly considered, it will then appear why Moses has chosen this as almost the only incident of Noah's life, subsequently to the deluge, which he thought it requisite to detail.

1. The transgression of Noah must evidently be referred for its origin to that fertile source, the infirmity and corruption of human nature entailed upon man as one of the inevitable consequences of the fall. Upon every child of Adam was that evil fixed, and we cannot, therefore, marvel to find the second universal father of mankind sinning not only after the example, but also after the similitude of the first. Adam fell by tasting of the fruit of the forbidden tree, and thus violating the positive prohibition of his Maker. Noah fell by taking of the permitted fruit in a forbidden measure, and thus perverting to the temporary suspension of his rational and bodily powers the means intended only for their preservation and increase. In this then the faults of the two Patriarchs differed, that the one consisted in act, the other in degree ; but in this they agreed, that in their essence and consequences they were very nearly the same. Both were accompanied by an abuse of the good creatures of God to purposes

they were never formed to serve ; and both were followed by a discovery of the nakedness and shame of the transgressors, and by the denunciation of a curse upon their posterity. That curse, therefore, may in both instances be accepted as a sufficient testimony of God's righteous wrath against sin, and we have no reason to require that Noah, any more than Adam, should have been rejected from all future favour for the criminality of a single, and that not a very grievous fault. For, whilst we carefully abstain from endeavouring to justify the Patriarch by forced interpretations and improbable assumptions, we should equally beware of aggravating his error beyond its due degree of guilt. There is nothing in the language of Moses to countenance the supposition of Noah's ignorance of the power of wine ; for why should he plant a vineyard, if he knew not the use and the effect of its produce ? It is but exposing the cause of truth to its adversaries, thus to reason upon principles we are unable to establish. But we have a just foundation for maintaining that, whatever might be the fault or folly of this single act, there is not the slightest trace of its ever having recurred, and that, in reality, the frailty with which this righteous being was overtaken, reached not beyond that excess which was necessary to overpower his faculties so far as to fall into a deep and unconscious sleep.

Throughout the whole transaction we meet not with the remotest allusion to any waking improprieties of which Noah was guilty, or with the most casual expression which could imply the banishment or disturbance of reason on her seat. It was a frailty to be palliated, though not excused. Now we admit the justice, and we admire the merciful recommendation of the Apostle when he beseeches the early Christians that "if any man were overtaken in a fault, they would restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering themselves lest they also should be tempted^a." Why then do we not carry the spirit of this precept into our perusal of that word of God of which it forms a part? Why do we not look with an eye of mildness upon the unwilling and solitary infirmity of one so righteous; considering that we also, if we were to be left without any place for repentance for each sin we have committed, would be altogether unable to escape; since we must be daily conscious of our numerous transgressions, even in the midst of mercies that are numberless; even under the remembrance of a still more marvellous redemption from a still more serious judgment. "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that" visitest with severity the sin of Noah; for wherein thou

^a Gal. vi. 1.

judgest another “thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things^a.”

2. The fault of Noah, as a sin of infirmity, and the sentiments we ought to entertain towards the doer of it, as towards one labouring under the common corruption of our nature, being thus once clearly understood, the fault of his son Ham can scarce be very difficult to apprehend. If “love covereth all sins^b, and if a tenderness to the failings of those from whom we have received kindness, and to whom we owe the duty of gratitude and reverence, be of any honour in the sight of men, or of any value in the formation of a meek and merciful disposition, then did the son of Noah fail in the possession of this claim to his father’s affection, and this mildness towards his father’s infirmity. To see the nakedness of him to whom he owed his being, would, if he had felt the sacredness of the parental character, have been to him a grief, and lamenting that his eye had been even an involuntary witness to a parent’s shame, he would have endeavoured to forget, and resolved never to reveal it. But to proclaim it to his brethren was, in fact, to proclaim it openly to the world, (for the family of Noah was then the whole world), and to expose, without reason or temptation, that upon which his tongue should

^a Rom. ii. 1.

^b Prov. x. 12.

have been for ever silent. Surely he could have been under no incapacity to understand the manner in which he ought to have proceeded. All the opportunities of instruction in the duties which we owe to the author of our life and happiness which his brethren enjoyed, he also might have embraced. Why then had he not, like them, learnt his duty ; and why was he not equally ready to practise it ? With reverential awe they looked not upon that, which they thought their father would disapprove their having seen ; and with filial tenderness they hid from the view of others what they would not behold themselves, because they could not behold it without regret and shame. “ Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father ; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness.” The historian by the minuteness of this description, by the anxiety with which he points out their reverential attitude, and by the repetition with which he enforces upon our attention the fact that “ they saw not their father’s nakedness,” seems evidently to mark and approve the respect with which they acted. Why then had not Ham before bethought him of doing the same ? Or why, if a mere casual inadvertency had induced him to communicate the situation of his father to his brethren, why do we not find him subsequently participating

in their pious deed? Shem and Japheth, we are told *both* laid the garment upon their shoulders, and both approached with their faces backward; but the name of Ham never once appears in this more commendable part of the transaction. He had been ready enough to tell the shame, though he seems to have displayed but little willingness to remedy it: and this his absence from the more amiable task of hiding the transgression he had seen, is sufficient to justify the sentiments which Noah, when he awoke from his wine, appears to have both entertained and expressed with regard to the different conduct of his sons. It is enough to account for the displeasure he displayed, without resorting for additional motives to the unsupported and traditionary tale of Ham having stood at the door to mock. For displeasure, under such circumstances as those we have described, must have been an instinctive feeling in every parent's breast.

It is still possible, however, that the Patriarch's disapprobation though justifiable in itself, may have been either objectionable in its character, excessive in its degree, or unjust in the object against whom it was levelled. We must now, therefore, in the third place, proceed to examine the nature of Noah's conduct, and the manner in which he is represented to have spoken and acted when he awoke from his wine.

3. It is to be observed, then, that Moses, in this part of his narrative, does nothing more than barely relate the words uttered upon that occasion. "Noah," he remarks, "awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, "Cursed be Canaan." We have here a simple statement of facts and words, unexplained by any commentary, and referred to no particular motive. The feeling, therefore, which we suppose to have dictated these expressions of the Patriarch, and the object we imagine he had in view in making use of them, are inferences which we ourselves deduce from the pages of the historian : and the historian himself cannot be made justly responsible for the consequences which flow from our conclusions, unless the truth of those conclusions can be irresistibly proved. Yet in direct violation of this rule the objectors to revelation have ventured to put the most unfounded construction upon the whole, and ascribing motives to Noah, at which Moses never even hints, have contrived to condemn him for improprieties of their own creation. They first assert, that the son alone was cursed for the transgression of the father, and presume that Canaan never would have become "a servant of servants to his brethren," had not Ham made known the nakedness of Noah. They next infer that Noah uttered the curse not in the spirit of

prophecy, but of wrath, and that Moses represents the Deity as having purposely fulfilled this unjust and angry denunciation. Upon such assumptions they may easily triumph against such a proceeding, as “contradicting all our notions of order and of justice^a,” for if their premises be just, their censure can scarce be too severe. But if it can be shewn that their interpretation arises out of an entire misapprehension of the origin of the Patriarch’s words, their condemnation must be relinquished, as being founded upon no real or solid grounds. This error of their’s, then, it shall be my endeavour to correct, by giving as clear an explanation as possible of the nature and object of this memorable curse.

I would maintain then, first, that Canaan was not ordained to become “a servant of servants unto his brethren” as a punishment for the transgression of his father. Wherever the calamities inflicted upon the Canaanites by the children of Israel are mentioned in Scripture, they are declared to be the consequence and the punishment of their own varied and increasing wickedness; nor were the chosen people permitted to take possession of the promised land, until the iniquity of its former inhabitants was

^a Lord Bolingbroke, the great objector on this subject.

full^a.” “For the wickedness of these nations did the Lord drive them out^b.” This is the declaration of Moses himself, and, consequently he is so far from representing the curse of destruction upon some of the descendants of Canaan, and the subjection of others, (as for instance the Gibeonites^c,) to the posterity of Shem, as originating in the denunciation of Noah, that he actually lays down a cause for their misfortunes which is altogether independent of Noah's words, and which would have produced those misfortunes even if Noah had never spoken of them at all. The true statement of the case is therefore this: not that the Patriarch's curse was the efficient cause of the slavery of the Canaanites, but that his curse conveyed a prediction of that misery which in the spirit of prophecy he foresaw would, in the latter days, befall a certain portion of the posterity of Ham. Is it not then a plain perversion of Scripture to suppose, that the son was punished for the transgression of the father? For would not the posterity of Canaan have proved wicked, and have been visited with the same vengeance, whether there had, or had not, been found iniquity in Ham? And is it not also an equal misapprehension of the truth to maintain that Ham himself was not punished by the prediction of Canaan's slavery.

^a Gen. xv. 16.^b Deut. ix. 4.^c Josh. x.

Surely, if there was any thing which could torture his parental feelings, and wound his parental pride, it was to be told of the humiliation and wretchedness which would overtake his children in some yet future generation. And surely, if there was any mode of convincing him of the irreverence of which he had been guilty, and of the merit of the superior tenderness of his brethren towards their father's infirmities, it was to learn that the humiliation and wretchedness of his descendants, would consist in their subjection to the posterity of those who had exceeded him in the duties of filial piety. From these considerations, it is evident, that Noah's curse was a prediction, and that the prediction inflicted a direct and immediate penalty upon the fault of Ham. He was punished by that melancholy knowledge, which the kindness of a benevolent Providence has almost universally withheld from man, the knowledge of that evil the future is to bring. Nor is this a solitary instance in Scripture of the spirit of prophecy being made subservient to the purposes of retributive justice. We have a parallel case in the rebuke of Isaiah the prophet to Hezekiah the king. Hezekiah in the pride of his heart, displayed before the ambassadors of Babylon "all the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all

the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures. There was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not^a.” Thus did he betray the vanity of his mind, and shew that the wonders of the Lord which had been wrought for his deliverance, instead of humbling him before the Almighty hand of God, had, through the natural infirmity of the flesh, but served to lift him up in his own opinion and esteem. What then was the method which the Lord took to correct and punish his pride? It was the very method which had been already adopted by Noah towards Ham. He sent unto him Isaiah the prophet, and Isaiah the prophet said, “Behold the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon. Nothing shall be left, saith the Lord. And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the King of Babylon^b.” It was for the crimes of Judah, that Judah was spoiled and led into a captivity in a foreign land; and all these predicted evils would have followed whether Isaiah had prophesied or no. But Isaiah prophesied like Noah, because Hezekiah had erred, and

^a 2 Kings xx. 13. Compare this chapter with 2 Chron. xxii. to xxxiii.

^b 2 Kings xx. 17, 18.

Hezekiah, because he had erred, was punished, like Ham, with the foreknowledge of the misfortunes which should befall his posterity; misfortunes of which, but for his error, he would have been permitted to live and die in a most blissful ignorance.

To confirm the conclusion we have thus drawn,—the conclusion that Noah's curse was but a prophecy of evil to come, and that, consequently, Ham was sufficiently punished by being thus made acquainted with the future evil which would have otherwise remained concealed from his view, we may add that this opinion gives a satisfactory account of the mention of Canaan only as being doomed to slavery. For we shall find by examining the history of the children of Ham that for the posterity of Canaan principally, if not exclusively, was the doom of servitude reserved. All the other descendants of Ham were equal if not superior to those of Japheth and Shem. In Egypt more especially, we know that, for ages, the Israelites were in bondage to their brethren the children of Ham. But all this glory of his race was withheld from the view of Ham, and the degradation of the Canaanites was alone revealed, in order to punish him for his want of reverence in the character of a child, by the contemplation of the

misery which awaited him in the character of a father.

4. Shem and Japheth were free from this want of filial reverence. To them, therefore, there was communicated the blessing of being told the glory, and spared the knowledge of the miseries of their race. But the glory of the race of each differed in some respect from that of the other, and therefore, also did the blessings which were severally pronounced upon each. Shem was to be the father of the Messiah according to the flesh; and hence we read that Noah declared that "blessed should be the Lord God of Shem." Japheth inherited a large portion of the earth, and his posterity embraced the faith and possessions of his brother; and hence we read that the prediction of Noah was, that "God should enlarge Japheth, and that he should dwell in the tents of Shem." Thus does the principle of interpretation we have assumed solve every difficulty as it arises to view, and explains, not only the cause of the curse upon Canaan, but the reason also of the distinction between the blessing pronounced upon Japheth and Shem.

5. I know, indeed, but of one difficulty more which can be supposed to attend the opinion we

have expressed on this subject. The spirit of prophecy, it may be said, is a favour conferred by Heaven only upon the most holy of men : and yet here we suppose it to have been conferred upon Noah as a consequence at least, if not as a reward, of his intemperance. But what, we may ask in return, was not Noah indeed one of the most righteous of men ; and is all his former obedience to be cancelled by a single and a casual infirmity ? The fore-knowledge of the future then, if ever it was deserved, was deserved by him. But be this as it may, we affirm that the power of prescience, as it was here communicated, so far from being a reward was an actual penalty upon the recipient. In the blessing which God had before bestowed upon Noah all his children were alike included, and no difference was either implied or expressed. “ God spake unto Noah and unto his sons with him, saying, Behold I establish my covenant with you and with your seed after you^a. ” No separation was here made, nor any curse proclaimed, nor any preference allowed. All were blessed in general terms ; and the particular limitations were not specified, because not essential to the purpose for which the blessing was given, namely, because not requisite to assure man that God would still watch over him in mercy, and never

^a Gen. ix. 8 and 9.

again “cut off all flesh” with a flood. Had Noah, therefore, received no other revelation, he might have gone down to the grave in the pleasing hope that harmony and a mutual and equal participation of the kindness of Heaven would be the lot of all his sons. But this charm of hope was broken, as soon as ever the infirmity of intemperance and the discovery of his nakedness by Ham had given occasion to a new communication of God’s will. He was then constrained to pronounce a curse upon a part of his own posterity in that of Canaan; to destroy the equality of all his children, and foresee the subjection and servitude of one portion of his descendants to the other. This was indeed a recompence, but no reward; a recompence for his fault, which made him feel the anguish which every parent must experience in looking forward to some impending misery upon the fruit of his loins. Noah, therefore, as well as Ham was visited with judgement in the curse pronounced upon Canaan, and thus the equity of the whole proceeding seems complete.

6. The last point we proposed to consider was, why Moses has selected this as almost the only incident in Noah’s life, subsequently to the flood, which he has thought it right to record, It is usually said that it was to encourage the

Israelites in their approaching contests with the nations of Canaan. This was no doubt one motive; but a still more cogent reason may be found in the remarks we have already advanced. One of the great objects of the Scriptures seems to be, to detail the gradual development of the primeval promise which declared that the woman's seed should bruise the serpent's head. For this purpose we find each of the more eminent Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, making, at one period or other in their lives, a formal election of one of their children in whose line this promise should be continued and fulfilled. Now the first blessing pronounced upon Noah after the flood, made, as we have seen, no such distinction amongst his sons. Had not, therefore, the spirit of prophecy come forth a second time to supply the defect, a link would have been wanting in the connected chain of individuals designated to this holy privilege; a chain which now reaches from the creation to the coming of Christ. But the narration of Noah's intemperance and prophetic blessings has filled up what would otherwise have been wanting in the prophetic scheme, and justified us, whilst tracing the lineal descent of the promise, to look to Abraham as its natural heir. Moses, therefore, may be regarded as fully authorised in having selected this circumstance from the rest of the

acts of Noah, because of its importance to the general purposes of revelation.

I have now shewn, that Noah's fault originated in the frailty of human nature, and by no means deserved the levity and exposure it met with from Ham, who, as one of the sons of Noah, ought to have been the last to have triumphed over his infirmities. I have also shewn, that the curse upon Canaan was, in fact, a prediction of the evil which befel his posterity in after times; and that such a prediction, by inflicting upon Ham the unwelcome knowledge of the humiliation and misery of his child, was a direct and immediate punishment of his want of filial reverence. I have still further shewn that the foreknowledge of this servitude of the Canaanites must have been a grief, and therefore a punishment, to Noah. Lastly, I have accounted for the introduction of this incident by Moses, because of its essential connection with the general scheme of prophecy: and what more than this can be required to remove every difficulty attending the incident, I am at a loss to imagine. Under this view of the transaction, it will surely be allowed that we ought no longer to indulge a doubt with regard to the propriety of the predictive curse of Noah, or a censure against the Scriptures for having recorded its utterance.

LECTURE XIV.

GOD TEMPTING ABRAHAM,
AND ABRAHAM'S OBEDIENCE AND FAITH
IN OFFERING ISAAC, CONSIDERED.

PART I.

GENESIS XXII. 1, 2.

“It came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. . . . And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains that I will tell thee of.”

GREAT was thy faith, O Abraham, and worthy indeed wert thou, to bear the name and the honours of the father of the faithful! To bring thy son as an offering to the altar of the Lord, and there to lift up the knife to slay thy son, thine only son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovedst, the child of thine and Sarah's age, the child of hope, the child of promise, the child of God; to bring that son as a victim to the shrine of the Almighty, and there “to lay thine hand upon the lad” to take away his life; in all this

there was an evidence of such undeviating obedience to the commandment of Heaven, a testimony of such firm and unalterable faith, as few of thy sons, however nearly resembling thee in these excellent gifts, have happily been called upon to bear. It was such a trial to human wisdom and to human feelings; it was such a trial to religious principle and to parental tenderness: to shed the blood of him to whom thou hadst communicated his being, seemed so to contravene the very rudiments of the law of nature; to cut off out of the land of the living him upon whom rested all the promises of blessing upon the human race, seemed so to render the accomplishment of those promises impossible, that nothing but an irresistible conviction of the reality of a commandment to do the deed,—a commandment originating in him whose will is law,—could either have suggested, or sanctified, or carried thee through the scene.

Thus far all agreed. That the trial of Abraham was difficult, beyond the difficulties to which men are subject in the ordinary temptations of life, is universally allowed. But from this point, the line of separation between the children of belief and the children of infidelity begins, and grows wider and wider at every step, as they proceed in the discussion of those principles,

upon which the solution of the controversy must ultimately rest.

The children of belief and of Abraham, taking for an ensample the dependence of their forefather upon the simple and unadulterated word of God, believe upon the authority of Moses, that the Patriarch acted upon a sure and ascertained commandment from the Lord ; and therefore was justified in his awful deed. They rest, in the second place, upon the inspiration of St. Paul, for their information with regard to the motives by which the Patriarch was influenced to obedience, and the means by which he reconciled the seeming contrariety of the two declarations he had received ; namely, that Isaac should be slain in sacrifice, and yet live to become the father of the promised seed. They hold it to be a faithful saying, that Abraham accounted God to be able to raise up his slain and offered son even from the dead : and thus do they think that they remove from his mind every apprehension of inconsistency between the commandment to sacrifice, and the promise to bless his son. Supported, lastly, by the united assertions of the Prophet and the Apostle, they maintain, that because Abraham believed the power, and submitted himself meekly to the recognised will of God, his obedience in that faith was rightly

counted to him for righteousness in the eye of eternal mercy, though he was himself far, no doubt, from being perfect in personal righteousness, when weighed in the balance of impartial justice. For God, that chargeth even the angels with folly, must needs be supposed to have beheld enough of impurity and imperfection, even in the character of faithful Abraham, to have blotted him out for ever from the book of independent merit.

These are the arguments of them that believe. The children of unbelief, on the other hand, trusting to the conclusions of human reason, as drawn only from their own general principles of moral obligation and their own philosophical systems of religious faith, maintain, that all these reasonings are feeble and inconclusive. Of the tenderness of Abraham's heart, and of the piety of his intention, and of the struggle which there must have been in his mind between the sense of duty and desire, they express no positive or considerable degree of doubt. But they argue, that he ought to have allowed no mode of divine communication to prevail over his better feelings, and bring him to the commission of what they deem a manifest act of paternal cruelty. That in Abraham's conduct we have a powerful example of the triumph of what was supposed to be

the dictate of religious principle over the yearnings of nature and a parent's love, they admit. But they hold, at the same time, that the triumph was gained, rather by an easy credulity than a well-grounded belief; and that it is, consequently, an example rather of an holy weakness of understanding, than a reasonable strength of faith. No evidence, however clear, could, in their opinion, have justified any individual father upon earth in believing that a commandment to slay his own and his only son, proceeded from the pitiful father of all in Heaven; or that his obedience, in consequence of that belief, would be considered and received as an acceptable service. Upon these considerations they conclude, that such a commandment is altogether unfit to find a place amongst the recorded dispensations of God to man, and such obedience equally undeserving of those repeated commendations with which it has been loaded both by Prophets and Apostles. They would praise the Patriarch indeed themselves; but with allowance and with judgement: and because they think it alike incongruous for God to require, and man to perform, the rite of human sacrifice, they commend the motive, but condemn both the deed of Abraham, and the book of Genesis.

In these remarks we have the substance of

the whole objection against the credibility and propriety of the fact in its literal interpretation. The commandment to Abraham to offer Isaac his son is censured, as unworthy of the holiness of God to give; unworthy of the wisdom of Abraham, as a man, to believe; still more unworthy of his tenderness and duty, as a father, to obey; and most of all unworthy of being represented, as it is represented in Genesis, as the cause of that pre-eminent blessing, which God so solemnly pronounced upon the Patriarch.

1. If such indeed were a true representation of the case, I know not with what semblance of reason we could venture to recommend the writings of Moses or of St. Paul to the perusal and meditation of Christians. But why is the command to be considered unworthy of God to give? Who are they that thus presume to determine the limits within which the will of the Almighty must move; and what are the rules by which they pretend to judge of the propriety of his commands? They are men, mere mortal and fallible men, who engage in this fearful responsibility, and their only ground of argument is some seeming incongruity between the command and what they are pleased to term, the eternal and immutable fitness of things. They tell us that the obligations of morality are "founded in nature," that they are

“ antecedent to the consideration of a Deity, and independent of any divine command^a.” Where theories like these have been once adopted into the mind; where the will of the Creator is thus bound down within the narrow space prescribed to it by the irresistible regulations of a pre-existing nature, whose laws are assumed to have been made known with such certainty and fulness to man, that he cannot in any instance mistake the line of conduct they proclaim as necessary to be pursued; where standards of morality like these are maintained, it is easy to perceive that the Omnipotent himself cannot be allowed to step beyond the bounds assigned to him by his creatures, nor to establish a single ordinance which the moral philosopher would deem inconsistent with his pre-established opinions upon what, under similar circumstances, it would have been proper for a mere man to ordain. But we, who have been taught to reverence the Creator as at once the Lord and the Author of that nature to which the creed of these philosophists would place him in an entire and unavoidable subjection, can never consent to a doctrine which would rob him of his liberty, reduce his power, and bring down the glories of his Godhead to the same level with our own dependent insignificance and inability. We who believe, that the will of the Deity is both the

^a Chubb's Case of Abraham.

origin and the criterion of what is morally right, and that he is the Lord, and not the subject of the fitness of things, and that the only invariable rule by which we can safely assume that he acts, is the happiness and welfare of the whole universe over which he presides ; we who submit to the principles of a moral philosophy like this, must freely and humbly confess, that there is no command which, antecedently to a consideration of the particular circumstances under which it is issued, and the purposes it is intended to serve, can be decidedly pronounced to be impossible for God to give. As a general proposition it is universally and undeniably true, that he never will at any time, or upon any occasion, require the obedience of an individual to that which may be absolutely inconsistent with his own eternal welfare, or the general good of the universal creation. But acknowledging, as we do, the wisdom of the Lord, we must acknowledge also that there are many things which he may see to be beneficial to the world, yet whose usefulness our ignorance is unable to appreciate. Believing also, as we do, in the omnipotence of Jehovah, we cannot but believe, at the same time, that his power will ever superintend and control the consequences of those commands his holiness has uttered, and obviate the evils which would naturally have followed, had they been only the commandments of a being incapable of regulating the

works and ways of men. It is in vain, therefore, for the Deist to urge the impossibility of the command to offer Isaac having proceeded from God, merely because it was a command for a father to slay his son. For if every precept which is an exception to a general law is to be regarded as in every instance demonstrating the immorality of the action required, we shall be compelled upon the same principle to condemn all systems of human legislation which authorise the ministers of justice to shed human blood, as guilty of sanctioning a violation of the commandment against murder. But the real truth evidently is, that every precept must be viewed and judged with reference to every surrounding event, and every connected consideration. The propriety or impropriety, therefore, of this particular command to Abraham is to be estimated, not from its abstract nature, but from an examination into the situation in which the parties stood, and the various purposes which were intended to be served.

2. Now in turning to this less abstruse and more profitable investigation, we shall find a variety of reasons which, whether they be separately or collectively weighed, are fully sufficient to teach us the presumption of that sweeping censure, with which the enemies of revelation have condemned the mode in which Abraham was so painfully

required to manifest his obedience to the will of Heaven.

1. The first of these is, that judging from the issue of the transaction, it is clearly to be inferred, that it never was the purpose of the Almighty that the command should be carried into actual execution. Abraham “came to the place which God had told him of, and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son^a.” In every thing he had obeyed the voice of the Lord, not only in the essential act which was prescribed, but in all the minuter particulars which were enjoined. He had taken “his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loved.” He had journeyed into the appointed land; he had come to the mountain which God had told him of; and that, in the intentions of his heart, he had already offered up his son as a burnt-offering to the Lord, his uplifted hand is an irresistible proof. It is to mark this perfection in the Patriarch’s obedience, and not merely in the simplicity of ancient narrative, that the sacred historian has so circumstantially related the particulars of the scene: and it is to demonstrate to every succeeding generation the full and complete sub-

^a Gen. xxii. 9, 10.

mission of Abraham to God's will, that the Father of Mercy had thus far withheld the interposition of his voice. But all these purposes were now answered. Scepticism itself could no longer doubt the Patriarch's readiness to obey; and therefore it was that, at this awful moment, "the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me^a." The end was accomplished, the obedience shewn; and the voice of the Holy One relieved the suspense of his faithful servant, and revealed to him the true object of a requisition so contrary to his expectations, and feelings, and hopes.

2. Here then we are introduced to another remark, which may be urged in justification of this singular command. It was uttered to make trial of the disposition of him upon whom it was laid. "It came to pass, after these things, that God did tempt Abraham^b." It was the last in the series of those memorable communications from heaven, by which his whole life had been so wonderfully marked, and in every one of which he had uniformly conducted himself as one who trusted not to his own understanding, nor guided himself

^a Gen. xxii. 11, 12.

^b Ibid. xxii. 1.

by the dictates of his own passions and propensities, but leaned entirely and meekly upon the Lord. Already had he quitted his country, and his kindred, and his father's house, and gone out, "not knowing whither he went"^a, in mere reliance upon a promise of God, the fulfilment of which he was never to be permitted personally to experience^b. Already had he relied upon the simple assurance of the Lord, and believed, though childless^c, in the multitude of his seed, and the blessings they should inherit, and the land they should hereafter possess. Already had he not staggered at the deadness of his own body, and of Sarah's womb, and was rewarded by the gift of a son in his old age^d. Yet "after all these things," after so many trials, and so many triumphs, after having been proved and praised in so many various and difficult scenes, after having talked with God, and entertained the angels, and interceded successfully with the world's just Judge^e, it still pleased the Lord to add one other temptation, before he should finally and irrevocably confirm to his person and his posterity the great glory of becoming the blessing of all the nations of the earth. That trial is the subject of our argument, and it consisted in a command of all others the most arduous for a father's tenderness to pass through unblamed

^a Heb. xi. 8.^b Gen. xv: 13—17.^c Ibid. xii. 14—18.^d Ibid. xviii.^e Ibid.

—a command to offer up his only son. To those who oppose the propriety of the circumstance the trial appears at once to have been both cruel and needless; and we readily allow that had it been proposed to any ordinary individual, or as a mode of informing the Deity himself of the disposition and feelings of this eminent believer, it would have been perhaps unnecessarily rigid, and more than mercifully severe. But he was no common individual from whom so peculiar a demonstration of submission was required. He was a being to be selected and separated from mankind as the friend of God, and to him, and to his posterity for his sake, were to be confirmed the best temporal and spiritual promises of the Most High. Hence it became necessary that every succeeding generation should feel thoroughly convinced that he, for whom so much was to be done, was worthy of the distinction he received: and satisfactorily to establish his title to this praise, no trial, however arduous, can be imagined too severe. For with all the difficulty which attended the command, and all the reluctance which Abraham, as a father, must have experienced in forming the resolution of obedience, we still hear men murmuring at the choice of his descendants as God's peculiar people, and condemning the mercy of the Almighty as exceeding the limits of legitimate favour. What then would have been the violence of their cen-

tures, had the temptation of the Patriarch been simple and mild, and had his obedience been less painfully called forth, it will be easy for any one to conceive. Had there been nothing that was uncommon in the trial to which he was exposed, men would have justly wondered at the greatness of those extraordinary blessings he obtained, and judged the measure of his reward to have been infinitely disproportioned to the merit of his faith. Instead of urging upon us, as they now do, the nature of the command as one it was impossible to obey, they would have declared that, seeing neither any singularity in his obedience nor any superiority in his faith, they could not but deem the preference he received to have been arbitrary and unreasonable, founded upon no pre-eminent merit, and conferred upon a being distinguished by no virtue beyond his brethren around. In a word, had Abraham been commanded only to bring the "calves of his lips," and not the fruit of his loins; or had he been required to offer up only the sacrifice of a broken and a contrite heart, and not the sacrifice of his only and his beloved son, we should have been at a loss to explain, or, at least, we should have been able but very inadequately to account for that unabated kindness, and those perpetual mercies, which his children were so long permitted to enjoy, amidst all their desertions of God's service, and all their violation of

his laws. Every particle diminished from the severity of Abraham's temptation, would have rendered it more difficult for believers to vindicate the favour which God shewed to him in his posterity.

Such are the reasons which induce us to think that the command to offer Isaac as a burnt-offering to the Lord, was not unworthy of the wisdom or the holiness of that Lord to give. His wisdom is vindicated, because, as Abraham was to be made the channel of irrevocable blessings, and exceeding great and precious promises to mankind, it was expedient that his obedience should be both most arduous in its nature, and most signal in its display; in order that mankind might have no reasonable cause for arraigning the justice of the glorious reward which his obedience obtained. The holiness of God is also sufficiently vindicated from any accusation of cruelty in the peculiar command which he selected for this purpose, because it is evident from the issue, that it was never his intention that it should be carried into actual execution. God gave the command to try Abraham, because for the satisfaction of future generations it was most necessary that he should be most severely tried: and he withheld from him to the last his determination to prevent the fulfilment of the command, because it was equally

necessary for us to know, that the trial was in truth and reality, and not in semblance and imagination alone.

These are conclusions deduced from the narrative of Moses ; and here we might stop the progress of our inquiries, content with the light they afford. But the dispensation of the Gospel, under which we have the happiness to live, contributes so many additional considerations to elucidate the reason why this mode of trial in particular was chosen, that however familiarly they may be known, we cannot be permitted to leave the subject incomplete by their omission.

3. We may remark, then, as a third method of establishing the propriety of this command, that there is such a remarkable resemblance between the circumstances which accompanied the offering up of Isaac, and those which are related of the crucifixion of Christ, that we are naturally and almost unavoidably led to regard them as intended to be the type and antitype of each other. Each individual concerned was an only and a beloved son of his father. Each was doomed by his father to be made a sacrifice. Each bore upon his own shoulders the wood upon which he was to suffer. Each willingly gave up the life he was required to resign, and

“as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so opened he not his mouth.” Each was counted dead in the sight of men, yet each was raised again, and returned unto those he had left. Each was the heir of the promise by descent, and to each the promise has been fulfilled. The seed of each has been “multiplied as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore, and in their seed have all the nations of the earth been blessed.” It is impossible to consider those resemblances, and not to perceive how strictly they correspond with each other. What then could be more proper or wise, than that God should choose that particular mode of trial for the Patriarch, which, whilst by its severity it proved to every succeeding generation the readiness and the fulness of his obedience and faith, would, at the same time, by its nature have a direct tendency to convince those who might live after the Messiah had appeared and suffered, that both the manner of his appearance and sufferings had been thus typified and foreseen. This prefiguration then of the sacrifice of Christ, which may be so distinctly and decidedly recognised in the offering up of Isaac to the Lord, and which could not have been unknown to the omniscience of him who gave the command, would seem, when added to the other considerations we have urged, to

account not only for the severity of the duty which was required from Abraham, but almost for every circumstance by which it was accompanied and marked. As a type of the Messiah, the command to offer Isaac was most fit to be selected.

Enough, I trust, has now been said to justify the ways of God to man, and to shew that this command was not unworthy of the holiness of God to give. But it still remains for us to justify the obedience of man to God. We have still to shew how Abraham, to whom some of the points upon which we have dwelt, must have been unknown, could yet perceive that the command was one which it was neither unworthy of his reason as a man to believe, nor of his tenderness as a father to obey. This, therefore, must be the subject of a following Lecture.

In the mean time, I would most earnestly exhort all, and especially those who are entering upon the investigations of moral philosophy, to be peculiarly jealous of the nature of those principles which they allow to become the fundamental principles of their acts or judgement. Virtue consists in obedience to the known will of God, and in nothing else. It may be right enough for those who have no revelation of

the divine will, to resort to those probable rules of right which reason propounds ; and it is always our bounden duty to reject every pretended revelation which lays down such general precepts for the regulation of our conduct in life, as contradict the feelings of nature and of conscience. It is upon this ground that we fearlessly reject the Scriptures of the Mahometan, because whilst they are unsupported by any solid external proof, they are internally condemned by the evidence of a variety of ceremonial and moral precepts, whose immediate effect, if carried into universal practice, would be to destroy, instead of promoting the happiness of mankind. But where the truth and divinity of a religion, like that of the Gospel to which we bow, is sanctioned by almost every kind of testimony which imagination could desire, and where its statutes and its ordinances are altogether merciful and holy and right, we should never permit such a compact and solid body of external and internal proof, to be borne down by the difficulty we may experience in explaining the propriety of a particular command to some particular individual, which was never intended to be made a guide or an example to others. Here it will be right to remember man's weakness and ignorance ; and here it will be right to reverence God's wisdom and power. But those who have

already embraced some invariable definition of right and wrong, can never be in a capacity to act thus. Whether their standard be laid in the general consequences of actions which they cannot always appreciate, or in the eternal fitness of things, which they seldom, if ever understand, or in some supposed natural obligations of morality antecedent to every consideration of a Deity and his will ; by which ever of these philosophical rules they presume universally to judge of the operations and commands of God, it is more than possible that they may often judge foolishly and censure in vain. Doubtless the Almighty can never really violate one single principle which philosophy approves ; but it is not unreasonable to allow, that there may be cases, especially in the brief histories of more ancient ages, where *we* may err in the application of the correctest principles. Above all, therefore, it becomes us, in the outset of life, to be cautious in the admission of such universal principles as, if once imbibed into the mind as the infallible criteria of things human and divine, may lead us to reject even our religion, and reprove even our God.

LECTURE XV.

GOD TEMPTING ABRAHAM,
AND ABRAHAM'S OBEDIENCE AND FAITH
IN OFFERING ISAAC, CONSIDERED.

PART II.

HEB. II. 17, 18, 19.

“By faith Abraham when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only-begotten son,....Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called:Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.”

To contemplate things fairly, and to form a correct and unobjectionable opinion, especially when the morality of human actions is concerned, it is necessary to view the subject not merely according to its abstract qualities, but also in its actual relations. For as every general principle is susceptible of a variety of limitations, we know not in what manner, or to what extent, that particular principle which is involved in

our inquiry ought to be modified, until we have examined it in its bearings upon the question in which we are engaged.

Pursuing this course in the preceding Lecture, we arrived at a conclusion directly the reverse of that which the Deist has embraced, upon the command by which Abraham was required to offer up his only son. We saw, from the issue of the transaction, that it never was the purpose of the Most High that the sacrifice of a human being should be carried into actual execution. We saw, from the narrative of Moses, that the primary object of the command was to try the Patriarch in the severest manner; and from a comparison of the circumstances of the transaction with the crucifixion of Christ, we were unavoidably led to suppose that a secondary and not less important object, was to prove to those who should live under the Gospel dispensation, that this great event had been typified, and consequently both foreseen and fore-ordained. The inference which we ultimately drew from these considerations was a vindication of the propriety of the command, as one which never could be unworthy of being given by that omniscient God, before whose eye every benefit and consequence which would result from it must have been completely revealed.

But there is not one of these observations which Abraham could have distinctly made for himself, before he had obeyed the injunction of the Lord, and “stretched forth his hand to slay his son.” That his obedience and faith were in reality most severely tried, he would inevitably feel; but he could have no certain knowledge that the command was intended *only* as a trial, nor could he be at all aware, that what was so solemnly required and circumstantially directed, would be so suddenly interrupted in its progress by the interposition of the heavenly voice. He could have little hope that the command would be recalled, and still less can he be imagined to have had that clear insight into its connection with the death of the Messiah which, in these later ages, we so joyfully recognise. When, therefore, we proceed, as is the purpose of the present Discourse, to shew the propriety of his obedience to the words he had heard, we must reason either from principles altogether different, or, at least, very differently modified, from those which have been hitherto the foundation of our argument. I mark this distinction the more carefully, because the confusion which has prevailed, from the want of a due separation between the different objections which may be made to this incident, and the different mode in which they are to be answered,

has been one great cause of the failure of divines in producing the conviction they desired. The propriety of giving the command, and the propriety of obeying it, are two separate propositions, and whenever they are confounded together in our inquiries, neither will our ideas be clear, nor our arguments conclusive.

Now in endeavouring to ascertain what might be the considerations which influenced the Patriarch to an act of such painful obedience, we may lay it down as an admitted principle, that he was fully authorised to fulfil both this and every other command, however repugnant to his feelings and thoughts, provided he could be satisfactorily assured that it really proceeded out of the mouth of God. God is the universal and all-mighty Governor of the world. By his wisdom all possibilities are foreseen, and by his power all events are regulated. To every one, therefore, who acknowledges that the Lord is King, and that he ruleth irresistibly over the affairs of men, and who believes, at the same time, that his mercy is over all his works, and that justice and righteousness are the habitation of his seat: to every one who thus thinks of the Deity, it must be evident that he has but to know the will of God in order to fulfil it. Such unquestionably was the faith of Abraham.

Looking up to the Holy One that inhabiteth eternity, as the mighty, but yet merciful Father of his creatures upon earth, he deemed that what he had called him to perform must be right to perform, and could be intended for nothing but kindness in reality, however harsh in its apparent tendency. What then were the grounds of Abraham's conviction upon these points? How knew he that it was indeed the Lord who had spoken? How could he reconcile the seeming inconsistency between the previous promise and the present command; or persuade himself that he with whom "there is neither variableness nor shadow of turning," could require him to violate the prohibition of shedding human blood? These are the questions we are to answer, and in order to give them a full and a fair consideration, it will be expedient to examine, first, the external, and secondly, the internal evidences of the divine origin of the command to Abraham. For the only true way of preserving the impartiality of the reasoning powers, and guarding against a precipitate or erroneous judgement upon any disputed point, is never to enter into any minute investigation of its nature and propriety, until we have, first of all, given a due attention to its positive and external proof. When the force of the latter has been once correctly appreciated, we shall then be able to perceive

what is the degree of moderation or boldness with which we may examine its internal fitness and consistency.

I. In the first place then we may observe, with regard to the *external* evidences of the divine origin of the command, that it is absolutely inconceivable how Abraham could for a moment be deceived or in doubt. Familiarised for the space of more than twenty years to a series of successive communications with a Being who claimed to himself the ineffable name and the awful attributes of Jehovah, he could not possibly be ignorant of the form and manner of his appearance. One professing to be the Lord had originally commanded him to quit his native country, and his father's land, and had promised him the land of Canaan for the possession of his posterity^a. One professing to be the same Lord had established with him an everlasting covenant, and instituted the rite of circumcision as its sign^b. In the plains of Mamre^c had the same Lord appeared unto him, and talked with him of Sodom and Gomorrah's wickedness, and told him of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction. The promises of a blessing to his seed, and of seed from Sarah, the commandment to leave Hagar to her fate^d, and to offer up Isaac his son,

^a Gen. xii. and xiii.

^b Ibid. xvii.

^c Ibid. xviii.

^d Ibid. xxi. 12.

were all pronounced in the name of the same God, and obeyed by Abraham as proceeding from the same authority. After such various and repeated intercourse with this mysterious personage, and after having heard his words upon so many different occasions, his must have been a treacherous memory indeed, if it could not recollect the sound of the voice which had so often directed his actions, and controlled his thoughts; and his must have been a weak and unsound judgement indeed if it could not distinguish between the signs of a real and a pretended communication from this frequent counsellor. But not only was Abraham, by the constant recurrence of these interviews with this awful Being, enabled to recognise his features, and perceive his footsteps; but he was also in a capacity to conclude without hesitation and doubt, that they were the footsteps and features of the all-powerful, all-merciful, and all-righteous Jehovah himself. For the son which this Lord had declared that Sarah should conceive, his power had enabled her to bring forth in her old age. The judgement which he had pronounced upon the lustful cities of the plain, his righteousness had executed before the morning's dawn; and the support and kindness which he had promised to the hated Hagar, his mercy had fulfilled, even in the wilderness, and without delay. All his words had been accomplished, all his

predictions verified, as far as the time and opportunity would permit; and amidst so many wise and wonderful works, it would have been most strange had Abraham imagined the Being with whom he conversed to be any other than that mighty King, whose vengeance is upon the wings of the wind, and who maketh his ministers a flaming fire; who turneth the standing water into a wilderness, and calleth for water-springs out of a dry ground; who maketh also the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Where testimonies like these had been given, it is clear that he could be doubtful neither with regard to the identity, nor the nature of him, who had demanded the sacrifice of his son, so far at least as the external evidences were concerned. Had the command therefore been merely of an ordinary kind, it is clear that no one would, for a moment, have imagined that Abraham was deceived in supposing that it was God himself who had spoken. He had sufficient proof both of the person and power of the speaker, to preclude every probability of error. Whether that probability of error was in any degree affected by the extraordinary nature of what he was required to perform; whether the internal unfitness and impropriety of the command to sacrifice his son, were not sufficient to counterbalance every external argument in

favour of its divine origin, is what we are called upon, in the second place, to investigate.

II. Now it must necessarily be allowed, that wherever a command is absolutely immoral, and altogether unworthy of being either enjoined or performed, there is no degree of external evidence which can outweigh the internal presumption against its divinity, or give us any reasonable satisfaction that it came from God. But before we venture to pronounce upon the immorality of a command, it may become us not only to consider well the relation in which it stands to each connected being and event, but also to examine with the utmost diligence whether we are acquainted with the whole circumstances of the case, and whether there be not reason to suspect that the Deity may have been influenced by motives unknown, or incomprehensible to our limited understandings. In every instance this is our duty as dependent and created beings, and the diffidence with which we pronounce our judgement ought always to be proportioned to the weight of the external evidence. It were most unnatural to suppose, that God would ever allow the positive proofs of any revelation to amount to so high a degree of assurance as to be incapable of being rationally rejected, were that revelation itself essentially repugnant to his will. Wherever,

therefore, the external evidence of a divine revelation or command is found to be of such an irresistible nature that, when taken alone, it would bear down every prejudice of unbelief, there we may fairly presume that the command did most probably proceed from God, and in consequence of that probability, we ought to be particularly jealous in the prosecution of our reasonings into its internal credibility. We ought to make every admissible allowance, and try every possible supposition by which it may be reconciled to our pre-established opinions. Since then we have already found how strong and irresistible must have appeared to Abraham the external marks of the divine origin of the command to offer up his son, it is evident, that in estimating its moral propriety, we are bound to be peculiarly diffident in our conclusions, and authorised to give its full weight to every consideration which he might adopt to justify his obedience.

1. The first difficulty, then, which the Patriarch would feel would be this, that the command required a sacrifice of blood : and the first consideration which might tend to remove this difficulty, would be the reflection, that sacrifices of blood had already been approved by the Deity in some of the most memorable instances, and

some of the most holy individuals whom the world had ever seen. In a sacrifice of blood had Abel been accepted, and through a sacrifice of blood had Noah obtained a renewal of the blessings and covenant of God. To Abraham himself also had a sacrifice of blood been already appointed as a means of assuring him of the fulfilment of the promises which he had received. "Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit this land," said Abraham unto the Lord God^a. And the Lord God "said unto him, 'Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove and a young pigeon. And he took unto him all these. And it came to pass, that when the sun went down and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. And in the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.'" Thus had God enjoined upon him the privation of animal life, as a religious service, and thus had his obedience been rewarded by the miraculous acceptance of his sacrifice and a solemn repetition of the temporal blessings he desired, and an additional confirmation of the covenant of the Almighty with his seed. Why

^a Gen. xv. 8.

then should he not suppose that God might now also require from him a similar but still more awful sacrifice of blood, as the last testimony of submission to his will, and a final preliminary to some still more extensive blessings, and some still better covenant? Human and animal life are alike at the disposal of their almighty Maker, and he has the same authority over both, and can with equal justice make the thunders of heaven, or the sons of Adam, the instruments of his wisdom and power. Human and animal life are also alike by nature withdrawn from the sword of man, and, without an express or implied permission from the Lord, we should have no more right to lift our hand against the firstlings of our flocks, than against the fruit of the womb. Why then should Abraham consider it as impossible for God to require this latter also as well as the former service from his servant. In his own ineffable kindness God had promised that in the Patriarch and in his son, should all the nations of the earth be blessed; but in his own ineffable wisdom he had withheld from him all knowledge as to the means by which that blessing was to be communicated to the world. What were the actions they were to perform, what the trials they were to undergo, and what the pains or the sufferings they were to endure, had never been clearly either intimated

or revealed. The performance then of this very command to sacrifice his only and his beloved son, might, perhaps, be the very condition upon which the accomplishment of this universal blessing to mankind had been suspended by heaven. Had there been any difference in the manner in which the command had been uttered, to induce him even to suspect that it did not proceed from the same source with the previous promises, then indeed the singularity and severity of the trial might have justified him in refusing to fulfil its painful duties. But we have seen that both the promise and the command proceeded from the same being, and were uttered by the same voice, and that this voice was the voice of the great Jehovah himself. The same testimony of his senses, the same conclusions of his reason, and the same lessons of long and repeated experience which confirmed to the Patriarch the divine origin of the one, confirmed to him also the divine origin of the other. If, therefore, he had refused to believe and obey the command, he must have begun at the same time to doubt and disbelieve the promise he had received, and suspecting one by one the truth of all his preceding revelations, have been led at length to suppose, what is the most unnatural of all suppositions, that the wise and merciful Governor of the world had

permitted one of the most faithful of his worshippers to be deceived through the whole course of his life by a series of apparent divine communications, the strength of whose evidence it would have been irrational to resist. Since then the external proofs of the divine origin of the command were not only convincing, but the very same which had accompanied so many undoubted revelations of the Almighty to Abraham, and since it was possible that the happiness of the whole human race might, in the counsels of the Most High have been connected with the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham was evidently justified in yielding to those proofs, notwithstanding the repugnance between this particular command and God's general laws. For where the welfare of the world is involved, the life of any single individual may most fitly be demanded as the equivalent.

Here then we have the reasons which might induce the piety of the Patriarch to offer up even a sacrifice of human blood. He knew not the whole of the case, and was therefore bound in humility and faith to be guided by the external evidence, and not presumptuously to set up the conclusions of his ignorance as an indisputable criterion of the fitness of the sacrifice required. The arguments, however, which then prevailed

with him, can never again be permitted to prevail with any other individual. Since the days of Abraham, the wickedness of mankind, and the interested cruelty of idolatrous priests have deluged the altars of their horrid deities with such a profusion of human blood, that it has pleased the Almighty expressly and unequivocally to forbid the repetition of the rite, upon any future occasion or under any possible pretence. "Every abomination to the Lord which he hateth had the Canaanites done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters had they burnt in the fire to their gods^a." Such was the iniquity of their general worship, and to prevent for ever the encouragement of the rite, and separate the service of the true God, from the depraved institutions of idolatry, Moses was commanded most solemnly to enjoin the Israelites to take heed unto themselves, and "not do so unto the Lord their God." By that injunction, therefore, we, and all to whom the oracles of God may hereafter be entrusted, are still and must for ever be bound. The sacrifice of a human being, however attested, can never be either rationally believed or innocently obeyed by us; not, however, so much because it is contrary to our reason to suppose it possible to require it, but because it is in direct contradiction to a preceding

^a Deut. xii. 31.

revelation of the will of Heaven, and, therefore, we are sure that it never will be required. But before the trial of Abraham by the command to offer up his son, it was not so. We have no record whatever to lead us to suppose that Moloch and his horrid rites, had ever at that time been practiced or even known. Nor is there the smallest vestige of any previous declaration from God himself upon the subject. The command to offer up his son came not, therefore, to Abraham, as it would to any Christian father, in the shape of a command to do that which had been profaned to the service of idols, and prohibited by the word of God: but it came to him as an awful and mysterious novelty, a revelation whose reasons were too lofty for him to understand, but whose evidence was too indisputable for his humility to resist. Such are the grounds upon which, whilst we vindicate the obedience of the Patriarch himself, we would forbid the obedience of any other individual, and prevent superstition from encouraging itself in the practice of any frivolous or inhuman rites. And this distinction it is most necessary to observe, because the strongest objections of the Deist are founded upon the implied sanction which they suppose the example of Abraham to afford to the delusions of mistaken piety in deviating from the commandments of the moral law.

2. We have now shewn what was the strength of that evidence which induced Abraham to believe that God had spoken to him, and by what arguments he might have been convinced that it was not impossible for God to require from him a human sacrifice. But there still remains another difficulty to be removed. Those very promises, for the fulfilment of which we suppose that Abraham might have imagined the sacrifice of his son to be the appointed means, were, apparently at least, in direct contradiction to such an idea. For Isaac had not only been declared to be that seed in whom "all the families of the earth were to be blessed;" but it had also been promised that Sarah should be "a mother of nations," and that "kings of people should be of her." Yet, besides Isaac, Sarah had no other child; and Isaac as yet had neither wife nor son. Where then, if Isaac was offered up unto the Lord, would be the fulfilment of this part of the promise to Sarah's seed? This is the difficulty, and we have the answer to it in the words of St. Paul. Abraham "accounted that God was able to raise up Isaac even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure." In a figure, Isaac had indeed been received from the dead when begotten by him, whose strength through age had become weakness, and born of her whose womb had been shut up even from her very youth. Yet

even under all those discouragements, Abraham^a “staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief,” but being strong in faith, “considered not his own body now dead, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb.” Even “against hope he believed in hope, and being fully persuaded that what God had promised, he was able to perform,” the performance of the promise rewarded his confidence, and the birth of Isaac when nature and expectation were almost gone, gave new vigour to his faith, and prepared him for the endurance of still greater trials. Those trials came with the command to offer up that son. But the belief in God’s power, which his reason suggested, and his experience had confirmed, he again called into exercise for his support, and his faith was again recompensed by receiving his son in a figure once more from the dead, when, having “stretched forth his hand to take the knife,” his arm was stayed by a voice from heaven, and Isaac restored to that life which, in all human estimation, was for ever gone. This, notwithstanding the apparent opposition between the promise and the command, is the manner in which his obedience may be rationally explained, nor is it an explanation which rests merely upon the authority and inspiration of St. Paul. It is implied in

^a See Rom. chap. iv.

the very words of Abraham himself when about to fulfil the heavenly command. "Tarry ye here," said he to the young men who accompanied him, "and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." These were not idle and unmeaning words, nor was this a moment in which a man so holy would have spoken what he did not feel. They were the true and solemn representations of his thoughts and hopes, and they express in terms which cannot reasonably be misunderstood, his faith in God's power, and his trust in his will to enable them, after having fulfilled the appointed sacrifice, to come again unto those they had left. They prove, as clearly as could be expected, that Abraham "accounted that God was able to raise up his son even from the dead," and thus justify both the opinion which has been attributed to him by St. Paul, and his own obedience, in consequence of that opinion, to the divine command.

Such, then, are the reasonings by which we conceive that Abraham may be shewn to have acted in wisdom as well as faith, when believing the divine origin of the command he had received, and obeying it even though it was a command to offer up a human victim, the child of promise, and his own only son. The external evidence in

its favour was such as in any ordinary case it would have been impossible to resist; whilst the internal evidence against its fitness was not such as to a faithful and an humble mind would render it impossible to reconcile it to the wisdom and mercy of the Deity. It was exactly, therefore, that species of revelation in which a pious disposition and a rational faith would be justified in allowing the external evidence to preponderate over the difficulties. For difficulties no doubt, with all his piety, and all his faith, Abraham must still have experienced in submitting to an act of obedience so singularly painful and severe: and strange would it have been had it been otherwise. If the last duty of his long and holy life, if the final trial of his reliance on God's mercy and power, had contained nothing to which the infidel could object, and nothing upon which the believer could hesitate; if it had been a command simple in its character, and easy in its performance, then, assuredly, it would have been most strange had God rewarded his obedience with that solemn renewal of the blessings which we read upon the present occasion. "The angel of the Lord," we are told^a, "called unto Abraham out of heaven, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord; for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in bless-

^a Gen. xxii. 15, &c.

ing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore ; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies : and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed ; because thou hast obeyed my voice." Here was a solemn recapitulation of all the promises which Abraham had previously received, and an irrevocable confirmation of them to his posterity ; and that, because he had obeyed God's voice. It would, therefore, have been still more hard for us to account for the greatness of this reward, had there been no objections or difficulties in obeying the command he had received, than it is now to explain the manner in which those difficulties and objections were overcome by his faith. We should then have wondered at the infinite disproportion between the duty and the recompence. We have now only to wonder at the strength of Abraham's belief, and to admire, and to imitate his submission to God's will. Let then that imitation be displayed by every act, and in every moment of our lives. We have all something upon which our hearts are set. It may be wealth, it may be fame, it may be dignity, it may be the honours of public, or the happiness of domestic life : and, as God trieth all the sons of men, and those the most severely whom he most strongly loves, it is more than probable that if,

like Abraham, we be indeed the children of faith, like Abraham too, we shall be called upon to resign that upon which our affections are most firmly fixed. There is indeed but one object of love which will never be torn from us, and that is the God and Saviour of the world. There is but one kind of joy and desire which we may indulge without fear, and never indulge too much, and that is the joy and the desire of those heavenly things which we shall never be called upon to sacrifice, and the supply and the love of which will grow and increase in us for evermore. Be it our care, therefore, to walk, like our father Abraham, by faith, and not by sight, and to fix our thoughts and hearts not upon the things which are seen, but upon the things which are not seen ; for the things which are seen are uncertain and temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal and sure.



LECTURE XVI.

JACOB AND ESAU.

PART I.

GENESIS XXVII. 33, 34, 35.

“ Isaac trembled very exceedingly, and said, Who? where is he that hath taken venison, and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before thou camest, and have blessed him? yea, and he shall be blessed. . . . And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceeding great and bitter cry, and he said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father. . . . And he said, Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing.”

It is impossible to read the history of which these sentences form a part, and not sympathize with Esau in his disappointment, and with Isaac in his distress. It is equally impossible to investigate the causes of that disappointment and distress, without condemning Jacob for his subtilty, and without including his mother also in the condemnation, as well as the commission of the fraud.

Neither do the Scriptures, in any of the numerous passages in which they allude to the life

and character of Jacob, give the smallest intimation of having regarded his subtilty as worthy of praise. Moses merely relates the transaction as it occurred : and St. Paul, in those observations which he has made upon the profaneness of Esau, never utters a single word to extol the righteousness of the means by which he was deprived either of his birthright or his blessing. He observes^a that Esau was a profane person, “who sold his birthright for one morsel of meat ;” but he never justifies the conduct of Jacob, in the artifice by which he supplanted his brother : and when, in another epistle^b, he speaks of the preference shewn to Jacob, in making him the progenitor of the Messiah, he resolves it not into the merit of Jacob, but into the will of the Almighty as its source ; “that the purpose of God might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth.” We do not, therefore, pretend to say, that the deception of Rebekah and of Jacob was a righteous deed, or one which can bear the scrutiny of a correct and rigid morality. Its subtilty and falsehood we alike condemn, and would make the errors of persons, so generally well affected to religion and to God, an awful warning to every Christian to “take heed lest,” however sincere and pious, “they fall” after the example of the same infirmity.

^a Heb. xii. 16.^b Rom. ix. 11.

Yet whilst we thus confess the fault of these individuals in their conduct, we would at the same time represent the motives by which they were influenced, and, by pointing out the object they had in view, and the reasons upon which they acted, would shew that it was one of those deeds in which there was more of human frailty than of human depravity; that the end was not unholy, though the means were unsanctified; in short, that it was one of those instances, of which we daily see too many in the world,—an instance in which evil was done, under the notion of securing some future good. Jacob and Rebekah conspired to deceive Isaac and supplant Esau, with a view of compelling the fulfilment of those promises which God had voluntarily made, and which without any improper interference on their parts, he would most assuredly also have brought to pass.

In order, however, that we may understand the matter more thoroughly, and perceive why Jacob and Rebekah thus united in the sin of subtilty, it will be necessary to retrace the history of Esau and his brother, from their earliest conception to their father's death.

It had been the good pleasure of God to declare to Rebekah, the mother of Esau and Jacob, that the elder should serve the younger: and this

declaration was made even before the children were born, and consequently before they could have had the possibility of doing either good or evil ; thus proving that the choice of God was not determined by their deeds, but by the counsels of his own eternal wisdom. Rebekah, we are told^a, “conceived ; and the children struggled within her. And she went to enquire of the Lord. And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels ; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger.

When the days of Rebekah were fulfilled, she brought forth twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the first-born, “and after that came his brother out.” Such were the circumstances under which these two beings were introduced into the world ; the elder under the certainty of a predicted subjection and inferiority to the younger, though at what period, and to what extent, was left in a great measure to be determined by the event.

It is written of Mary the mother of our Lord, that “she pondered all” those extraordinary things which were connected with her son, “and laid them up in her heart ;” and we shall find the

^a Gen. xxv. 21, 22, 23.

women among the Israelites always peculiarly attentive to every thing relating to the promises with regard to the Messiah, and most anxious for the birth and number of their sons, grieved at their want, and rejoicing in their multitude. This direction of thought and feeling became naturally prevalent after the promise which had been conveyed to the woman after the fall. “*Thy seed shall bruise the serpent’s head,*” had the Almighty declared unto Eve, and in every successive generation did those who lay within the sphere of the fulfilment of the prophecy, most earnestly hope or fear that the promised seed might be granted or denied to their maternal pangs and prayers. In consequence of the same prophecy the declaration of God to Rebekah respecting her sons, would make a necessary and deep impression upon her heart. That the blessing of Abraham had rested upon her husband Isaac, she could not for a moment doubt; and as she was his only wife, and Jacob and Esau her only offspring, as little could she doubt that to one of the two would the same blessing descend. When, therefore, she heard the word of the Lord pronouncing that the elder should serve the younger, she would immediately, and almost inevitably conceive, that the prediction had a reference to the great event; that in him should all the families of the earth be blessed, and that, either in his per-

son or his posterity, he would become the seed of the woman to bruise the serpent's head. Jacob was that younger son, and thus we obtain an easy and satisfactory explanation of that brief, and apparently incidental remark of the historian, that "**Rebekah loved Jacob.**" Like Mary, she had pondered all the prefigurations of the glory which awaited him, and his election by God became the ground-work of her attachment to his interest, and of her wishes and labours to place him in the situation to which she supposed he had been predestined by prophecy.

The affections of Isaac were influenced by different motives, and fixed upon a different object. Whether he knew of the prediction which had been uttered concerning the relative situations of his two sons, we are not told; but it is scarce probable that in a matter of such consequence to himself, as well as to his wife, she should have permitted him to remain in ignorance of the answer she had received from the Lord. In the mind of Isaac, however, the prophecy, if known, did not operate in the same manner. In his mind the promise did not produce the effect of fixing his affection upon the child of promise. "**Esau was a cunning hunter of the field, and Isaac loved Esau because he did eat of his venison.**" His skill in the comparatively insignifi-

cant accomplishments of the world, and the power which that skill had placed in his hands, of ministering to the gratification of the bodily appetites of his father, wrought far more strongly in his favour, than motives of a spiritual nature would, perhaps, ever have done. It is melancholy thus to remark, even in the holiest of men, the prevailing infirmities of the carnal mind, and we are tempted to wonder, to despise, and almost to doubt whether such unworthy reasons could have been the real cause of the love which was borne by the Patriarch towards Esau. But the words of the historian unequivocally assert the fact, and forbid the doubt, and call upon us the more strongly to guard the issues of the heart, to watch, with unwearied diligence, over the channel in which the affections flow, and to sanctify the passions of tenderness and love, both by the purity of their motives, and the worthiness of their objects.

Under these different auspices, Esau, under the protection of his father, and Jacob in the enjoyment of his mother's preference, did the two children grow up into manhood; and between this period and that in which the subtilty of Jacob obtained the blessing intended for his brother, there are but few incidents of their lives recorded. They are all, however, and one

more especially, of very great importance; I mean the sale of the birthright by Esau.

Whatever doubt there may be as to Rebekah's having informed Isaac of the prophecy which related to Jacob, that she should have withheld the substance of it from Jacob himself is altogether incredible. He was her favourite child, the child of her hopes, and God's promise. We must, therefore, necessarily conclude, that he knew of his destination, and was not ignorant that, in his person or his posterity, his elder brother should serve him. Now it so happened that once, after the exercise of his usual occupation, "Esau came in from the field, and he was faint. And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, for I am faint. And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright. And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die, and what profit shall this birthright do to me? And Jacob said, Swear to me this day. And he sware unto him; and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread, and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way^a."

The anxiety displayed by Jacob for the purchase of the birthright is remarkable, and would be unaccountable upon any other supposition

^a Gen. xxv. 29 to 34.

than that of his having been acquainted with the prophecy made concerning him to his mother. But, though both acquainted with the promise and its unerring source, he still has not that perfection of faith which relies implicitly upon the word of God, but must needs presumptuously endeavour to fix its completion by an artifice of his own. The priority of Esau's birth seemed to be the only obstacle which stood in the way of his pre-eminence, and forgetting that there is power as well as knowledge with God,—power to fulfil, as well as knowledge to foresee the destiny of each individual upon earth, he needlessly laboured to remove the difficulty by purchase. His success was favoured by the circumstances and character of his brother; and Esau, regardless of the only claim he possessed of becoming the father of the Messiah according to the flesh, sold it in his faintness for one morsel of meat, and thus sacrificed his best hope of being distinguished amongst the future generations of men, and of having all the families of the earth blessed through his name. “Thus Esau,” as the historian observes, “despised his birthright,” and transferred to the subtilty of Jacob the claim of right to its privileges and its blessings.

There is but one other circumstance which it will be necessary to mention, before we proceed to

the consideration of the means by which Jacob, after having obtained the birthright, obtained also the blessing; and that is, the marriage of Esau. He connected himself with the family of Heth, who were not of the descendants of righteous Abraham, but of the idolatrous and corrupted Canaanites, of all others the most likely to withdraw him from the worship and the fear of God. When “Esau was forty years old^a,” when the passions and inexperience of youth were past, “he took unto wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and unto Rebekah.”

Such was the state of Isaac’s family at the period of the transaction we are now about to examine. Jacob was the child to whom a promise of pre-eminence had been given by God, and who had further secured to himself the rights of primogeniture by purchase from his brother. Esau had no promise, and had besides shewn himself unworthy of all the common advantages of his birthright, by the foolish sale which he had made of his inheritance to his brother, and still more unworthy of all its spiritual privileges, by marrying into an ungodly

^a Gen. xxvi. 34.

family, whose example and whose principles could scarce bring any thing but an ungodly offspring. The promise and the right were therefore both Jacob's, and Esau was unworthy of both. It is also extremely probable, that both Isaac and Rebekah knew that the promise was Jacob's, and it is quite certain that they were aware of the unworthiness of Esau. Yet notwithstanding the grief which Isaac had felt in the conduct of Esau, favour prevailed against judgement, and the partiality of love breathed into the breast of the Patriarch the desire of making the best of his blessings descend upon the head upon which his affection rested. "It came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called his eldest son Esau, and said unto him, Take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field and take me some venison, and make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die^a."

"Rebekah heard when Isaac thus spake to Esau his son," and influenced, on the other hand, by her love to Jacob, and perhaps also by her reverence for God's prophetic declarations, she planned that well-known system of

^a Gen. xxvii. 1, &c.

deceit, and instructed her son in that subtilty by which he misled his father, supplanted his brother, and secured for himself what he thought essential to his views, the prophetic blessing of the aged Patriarch. When Isaac knew what was done, he was grieved indeed, and “trembled very exceedingly,” but yet seems immediately to have recognised the overruling hand of Providence in the whole, and then willingly to have confirmed that blessing which before he had only unwittingly pronounced upon Jacob. “I have blessed him,” says he, “yea, and he shall be blessed.” But yet to compensate, as far as possible, to Esau, for his disappointment and loss, he pronounced upon him another, a great, and almost an equal blessing;—equal in the promises of earthly enjoyments, and temporal possessions, and subjected only to that limitation, which God had before expressed, that as the elder he should serve his younger brother. “Behold,” said Isaac unto Esau, “thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above; and by thy sword shalt thou live and shalt serve thy brother: and it shall come to pass that when thou shalt have the dominion, thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck.”

We have now before us the whole history,

so far at least as it is requisite to be known, in order to enable us to judge of the comparative faults and merits of the several parties concerned ; and we shall find upon examination that every one of them did sin, by falling short of that righteousness which the perfection of the moral law demands.

1. Isaac, if he knew the will of God, ought never to have entertained a single thought in opposition to its dictates. “The elder shall serve the younger,” had the Lord said, and who was he that he should dare or desire to turn the supremacy into a different channel ? Yet such would inevitably have been the effect of the blessing he pronounced, had it descended, according to his intention, upon Esau’s head. “Be Lord over thy brethren,” is one of the principal parts of Isaac’s address to Jacob, whilst imagining him to be Esau, “and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee ;” and such language, if he had ever heard of the answer which Rebekah received from God, betrayed an evident attempt to counteract the designs of Providence. It is almost impossible, however, to read the narrative of Moses, and suppose the Patriarch ignorant of this memorable prophecy. His knowledge of its existence, and his anxiety to avoid its completion, is displayed by

the whole course of his proceedings. It is to be gathered from the earnestness with which, so many years before his death, he directed Esau, and Esau alone, to come to him for a blessing, lest the uncertainty of life in advancing age should cut him off out of the land of the living before he had an opportunity of communicating to him that essential privilege. It is marked by the subject-matter of the blessing itself; and more especially it is visible in the agitation of his mind at the frustration of his purpose, and that sudden confirmation of his unwilling deed which was immediately afterwards conveyed to Jacob in the words, “Yea, and he shall be blessed.” But even had Isaac been altogether ignorant of the prediction which had been uttered concerning his children, he still must be considered as not entirely exempted from blame in permitting his affection to become the slave of his appetites, and preferring, as far as it was in his power, to make that child, who had so grieved him by the irreligious tendency of his connection with the family of Heth, the inheritor of those spiritual privileges which required above all things a holy form of worship, and a pious frame of mind. To select as the destroyer of man’s enemy, a being who had made a covenant with the subjects of that enemy, was an evidence neither of his wisdom

in the choice of instruments, nor of his regard for the honour of God, or the interests of true religion.

2. If there was infirmity in Isaac, there was profaneness in Esau, a recklessness of all those spiritual privileges of which his father and his posterity were the undoubted heirs. "In Isaac shall thy seed be called," was the promise made distinctly to Abraham, and all the hopes of Esau to become the channel for the continuance of that promise, rested upon his hereditary claims. But he sacrificed all for one morsel of meat. Faint he might be and weary from fatigue; but he undoubtedly exaggerated his sufferings when he spoke as being "at the point to die;" for no sooner did he eat and drink, than it is immediately added that "he rose up and went his way." But, whatever might have been his state, it is impossible to imagine that the beloved child of an affectionate father would have run the risk of famishing under that parent's roof, or that the only practicable means he possessed of satisfying his hunger and refreshing his strength, consisted in the renunciation of the rights attached to the priority of his birth. Either, therefore, we must suppose that the food which he sought from Jacob, held forth to his appetite a temptation for which he was content to

barter his best and brightest prospects, or, what from the language of St. Paul is a still more probable conclusion, that he esteemed so lightly the privileges attached to "the blessing of Abraham," as to barter them in sport, or mere momentary weariness. But thus, in either case, did he "despise his birthright," and shew forth the profaneness of a mind which could disregard the promises and privileges which, in the most solemn of moments, the Almighty himself had, in the most awful of forms, pronounced as the best reward he could bestow upon the righteousness of the great father of the faithful. In the fear of death, and the pains of dying, a holy heart, would have clung tenaciously to such a birthright as its truest consolation in this life, and that which might become its best blessing in another. Esau by resigning such a birthright without a reason or a regret, has confirmed beyond contradiction the Apostle's accusation against him. His profaneness, or as it would in modern days be termed, his want of all serious impressions and religious views, is so clearly established by that single act, that it is scarce necessary to refer to the additional proof contained in his departing from the race which God had chosen, and seeking to himself a partner for life amongst the wickedness of Canaan. The connection was formed in mature age, and be-

fore the subtilty of Jacob, by robbing him of the blessing, had given him the excuse of disappointment for his waywardness. The thing grieved his father and his mother, and he must have known that it would grieve them, and that to mingle in domestic habits, and train up his children amidst a generation upon whom Heaven had already denounced vengeance for their iniquities, was what could neither tend to the holiness of his posterity nor his own. But Esau "cared for none of these things;" and I much fear that, in general, we resemble him too nearly ourselves to be duly sensible of the guilt of such levity towards godliness.

3. Yet, whatever might be the demerit of Esau, his mother had no right to sin for the sake of punishing it. Her motive might be holy, and, in all that she did, it might be her wish to fulfil the promises of God. But who was she that she should presume to act deceitfully even for a religious end:—who, that she should venture to do evil that good might come? If she believed in God, she ought to have trusted in God, and left his own arm to accomplish its own purposes. He had sworn, and surely he would also have brought to pass. Or, if she was indeed resolved to do any thing in furtherance of the will of Heaven, she ought fairly

and openly to have represented the state of the matter to Isaac, and then patiently have resigned the disposing of the whole unto the Lord. This was the line which duty and integrity prescribed, and by deviating from that line, she did not indeed frustrate those events which had been determined by the counsel of the Most High, but she brought sin and misery in abundance, both upon herself and her favoured son.

4. For Jacob also sinned,—sinned in yielding to the intreaties of his mother, and in following her in doing evil that good might come. Her entreaties only suggested the scheme of subtilty. It was his own anxiety for the end proposed which effectually wrought upon him to yield to the temptation. In that anxiety, he overlooked the objectionable character of the part he was to assume, and the only reluctance he expressed to engage in the fraud, is founded upon the danger, rather than the impropriety of the plan. “My father peradventure will feel me,” said he, “and I shall seem to him as a deceiver, and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing.” It is possible indeed, it is perhaps probable, that Jacob, having already acquired the birthright by purchase, might deem that he had a right also to that blessing which was now to be pronounced upon Esau, as upon

the elder son. Esau had no longer the claims of primogeniture to entitle him to such a preference, and in consenting to accept the advantages after he had transferred the charter of his inheritance, he acted naturally, but scarce innocently, to Jacob. Jacob, therefore, might easily regard Esau as having ceased to be the elder, as to all practical purposes, and might not unreasonably conceive that in following the subtle dictates of his mother, he was but asserting his own legitimate rights. By considerations like these we may palliate, but can never altogether remove his guilt. He should still have regarded the nature both of the transaction in which he was now engaged, and the means by which the birthright had already passed into his hands. In the treaty with his brother he might applaud his own zeal, but not his own humanity: and if in the present adventure he could perceive that he would "seem a deceiver" to his Father, and "bring a curse upon himself and not a blessing," if detected, he might have considered that the act which such a father would condemn as deceitful, could scarce be consistent with the rules of a strict and straightforward integrity. But Jacob was a man, though a pious one, and like the rest of men was content to be less scrupulous in accomplishing the wishes of his heart.

Thus it appears that every one of the individuals engaged in the transaction under our review had something to blame in themselves. Isaac in the partiality of a fond and foolish affection, founded on weak or unworthy grounds, would have counteracted, had it been in his power, the designs of an unerring Providence. Esau, after having in levity thrown away his rights, would yet have retained the benefits attached to those rights, and evaded the consequences of his own regardlessness of his holy birth. Rebekah framed a fraud, where she should have exercised her faith; and Jacob consented to be a partaker in her subtilty. Thus all were sinners; but who is there that is otherwise? The best of human beings have many frailties to weep for, and to confess; and in the best of our deeds we may generally find more of imperfection and frailty than in this, and that too without having, in general, the same good and religious end in view; without one thought either of God or his promises, ever entering our minds. To such then as would pass a sentence of unmitigated severity upon all, and censure the Holy One and the Just, for having permitted his favours to rest on such imperfect creatures as Isaac, and Rebekah, and Jacob,—to such I would say, Who art thou that judgest another, and expectest mercy for thyself? Look to thine own heart and

repent ; and remember, that if God were extreme to mark what is done amiss, there never was, nor is, nor will be, either Patriarch, or Prophet, or man, the holy and the blessed Jesus alone excepted, who could escape the wrath of God if tried upon the question of his own intrinsic merit. With that exception alone, then, it is evident that if favour be shewn to any upon earth, it must be to a sinner, forasmuch as all have sinned. They are not, therefore, to be held unworthy of God's mercy, merely because sinners, since their sin, after all, was not of so deep a dye, and since God mingled a full and sufficient measure of judgment with the mercy he shewed. In fact, as Jesus stands forth pre-eminent and solitary in his spotlessness amidst surrounding guilt, so will the workings of Providence, also, in the history we are contemplating, be found single and superior in untainted rectitude amidst the crooked and perverse doings of each of the inferior instruments. For there was not one of these erring agents who did not reap the bitter fruits of his deviation from righteousness ; not one who was not punished in proportion to his guilt, and in a mode exactly analogous to the nature of his guilt. God visited each in his turn with just the manner and measure of suffering which his sin would seem to have required ; and has thus vindicated before angels and men his hatred to the evil, and his

respect unto the good, impressing upon all the warning which their proneness to corruption demands, and the hope which may yet save them from despair. The detail of that retribution must be reserved for future discussion. For the present, it will be enough for us to draw from the examples of infirmity before us, those cautions which they afford against some errors to which we are peculiarly liable both as Christians, and in domestic life.

As Christians then, we may learn by considering the respective characters of Esau and Jacob, to correct those imperfect and erroneous estimates which are so prevalent both with regard to the merits and the duties of men. There was a generosity of temper, an openness of disposition, and a kindness of heart in Esau, which we cannot but often both approve and admire. Under the impulse of a sudden resentment he formed indeed the design of shedding his brother's blood, but when afterwards endued with power to revenge his injuries, prosperity had softened, instead of hardening his heart. He forgot his wrongs, relented from his wrath, and treated that very brother who had supplanted him with a tenderness and a liberality to which it would be unjust to be insensible. This is the very disposition which the world is so apt to


praise. It is its natural favourite, because it implies the presence of some engaging properties which render the intercourse of life easy and agreeable. But we should recollect, that in too many this amiableness of temper is, as in Esau, a mere moral qualification, or gift of nature, and may be found in those who are quite aliens to the "one thing needful,"—without any deep reverence for God, or any serious impressions of divine things. Little, therefore, does it merit the exclusive admiration it receives, and still less is it to be admitted as a substitute for a principle of religion in the soul. Yet a principle of religion in the soul is not always accompanied by the fruits of righteousness; and such is the deceitfulness of the heart, that the consciousness of the holiness of our general views is apt to make us careless about any little deviations from the moral law. Jacob with all his desire for God's blessing, and however zealously affected towards the interests of godliness, yet sinks before the profaneness of his brother, in some of the minor charities of life, and appears at times neither so amiable nor so sincere as Esau. The unbelieving world, and the world in general, are apt to censure him too severely for those faults, and in their esteem for what is delightful in a companion, rather than what is truly excellent in the sight of God, to condemn both him and every other professor of

piety, who may fall into a fault, as guilty of the worst hypocrisy towards his Maker. On the other hand, the religious world are far too anxious to palliate, or to deny, the existence of the failings of pious individuals, and far too careless of preserving the spirit of cheerfulness in themselves, and of kindness to their brethren. In the earnestness of the pursuit after personal holiness, they regard too little the effect which their ungenial conduct produces on the happiness of others. Against all these faults we may learn to guard from the examples before us. We may there see, not only how valueless are the more amiable qualities of disposition and temper if not sanctified by piety, but also how shameful and how sinful it is for piety to relax in the smallest degree from the strictness of the moral law, or to neglect the cultivation of the generous and engaging qualities of the heart.

In regulating the affections in domestic life, the lesson we are taught is that of founding them upon some solid basis, and directing them to worthy objects. Regarding only the lusts of the eye, or the dictates of appetite, Isaac fixed his partial love upon his less deserving child, and Esau chose the wife of his bosom from the enemies of the Lord, and to the grief of his parents; and the consequences to both were misery and sin. It is

indeed a fearful error to imagine we have a right to dispose of our affections as we will. In their direction, their duration, and degree, they are to be regulated and controlled, like any other gift of God, and to be applied, as they have been communicated, to his, and his peoples' use and service.

These are the instructions to be gathered from the whole ; and if we will but duly examine how liable we are to fail ; nay, how frequently we have already transgressed the holiness of God's law upon these points, we shall then be prepared more fully to appreciate our danger, more deeply to be affected by the punishment with which we shall perceive, in our next Discourse that these errors, in the present instance, were visited, and more effectually moved to repentance and to vigilance, lest the same punishment should fall upon ourselves.



LECTURE XVII.

JACOB AND ESAU.

PART II.

EZEKIEL XXII. 17, 18, 19.

*“ Their own way have I recompensed upon their heads,
saith the Lord God.”*

THE utmost which retributive justice can legitimately inflict upon the transgressors of a law, is a punishment proportioned to the offence. It would be a manifest advantage, doubtless, if this punishment were made to follow immediately after the commission of the crime ; to arise out of the very circumstances of the transgression ; and to bear in all its parts the impress of retaliation as well as judgement. For when the sword with which the murderer has pierced his brother's breast is plunged the very next moment into his own, we are struck with an additional awe. But though the readiness with which the arm of vengeance is lifted up, and the analogy between the penalty

and the guilt be indeed powerful in their effect upon the feelings, they are not absolutely necessary to the ends of substantial justice. If the slayer be slain, no matter how, we deem it enough to give a warning to others against the repetition of the crime: and neither the practice nor the precepts of any human legislator prescribe an uniform similitude between the sin committed and the suffering endured. They measure, but they do not mould the one by the other.

Such being the principles upon which sentence is usually pronounced against a malefactor; and the certainty rather than the time or manner of visiting guilt with the proper degree of punishment, being that which it is of most consequence to bring home to the reflections of mankind, we may next observe that in order to justify the ways of God to man, it is not necessary that the displeasure of the Almighty against every individual sinner should be uniformly manifested in the life that now is. Confiding in the unerring equity of the Lord, and believing in the reality of a future state, we have no reason for condemning the ways of Providence as unjust, merely because we behold the ungodly rejoicing in the prosperity of the present world. We know that “doubtless there is a God that judgeth the earth^a,”

^a Psalm lviii. 11.

notwithstanding the numerous inequalities we observe in the distribution of happiness and misery, and we feel convinced that from his all-seeing eye no iniquity can be hid, and that from his ineffable purity no wickedness can escape. Though, therefore, we should see the wicked that “they come in no misfortune like other folk^a,” yet should we still consider their final retribution to be equally sure and severe, and look forward with a fearful foreboding to that grievous recompence which, unless averted by penitence and faith, is most assuredly reserved for them at the resurrection of the dead. If then the Scripture had been altogether silent as to any punishment which, on this side the grave, was inflicted upon the subtilty of Rebekah and Jacob (for it is with a view of applying them to the history of these individuals that I have introduced the preceding remarks): if, I say, we had seen them flourishing through the whole course of their lives in one unbroken train of prosperity and joy, whilst Esau, the victim of their arts, was depressed, degraded, and in want,—we should still have had no right to condemn the dispensation of Heaven, or to deny the Scriptures to be a revelation of God’s will, because they have recorded such a dispensation. For whilst the Bible represents the ways of righteousness as having a gene-

^a Psalm lxxiii. 5.

ral tendency to increase our happiness, and the deeds of iniquity as naturally attended with evil of every kind, they yet guard us against expecting these to be the constant effects of virtue and vice, and exhort us rather to look to eternity than time, for the period in which every man shall be rewarded according to his deeds. Here the same events often happen alike to all. Hereafter only are we taught to look for a retributive state. As Moses, therefore, has stigmatised the act of Jacob with the name of subtilty, he has done enough to vindicate his moral character as an historian ; and as St. Paul has attributed the election of Jacob, and the rejection of Esau, to the inscrutable decrees of the Almighty, and not to the respective merits of the individuals themselves, he has also done enough to relieve the doctrine he propounds, from any censure, as being inconsistent with the fundamental principles of justice. The objection, if any, must be made to the doctrine of Predestination in general, and not to the grounds of the choice in this particular instance.

But it has pleased the Author of all wisdom, that we should not be left to depend for our entire defence upon the universal laws of retributive justice alone. Besides the condemnation which every man's mind naturally passes upon the conduct of Jacob, a condemnation inevitably pro-

duced by the mode in which Moses has framed his narrative, we shall find, in examining the subsequent events of the lives of each of the agents in the scene, not only that they were punished in this life, and in proportion to their relative demerits, but also that the penalties to which they were subjected had all the advantages we have already pointed out as increasing the beneficial influence of a judgement inflicted upon the guilty. The sentence was not only essentially retributive, but most speedy in its execution, and strictly analogous to their crimes.

1. As the error of Isaac was the least, so was his punishment the lightest of all. To fix our love upon a chosen object, who, instead of repaying our anxiety by his excellence, displays, in the most important action of his life, a carelessness of pleasing, and a contradiction to our will, is a source of grief which the most unthinking will comprehend; for it is founded upon the feelings of our common nature. To study the welfare and the interests of some beloved being; to prepare the way for the accomplishment of our desires for his happiness, and then to find our purposes frustrated at the very moment in which we imagined they had been fulfilled, presents a picture of disappointment and distress, which few would be content to see realized, however deser-

vedly in themselves. Yet did both these miseries await the misplaced affections of Isaac. He permitted his heart to yearn with an overweening fondness towards his less deserving child; and in the disobedience and waywardness of that child he experienced his punishment and his grief. In the very hour in which he imagined he was testifying his tenderness in his blessing upon Esau, he was taught the bitterness of wounded feelings, and blighted hopes, by finding that the weightiest of his words, and the warmest of his wishes had fallen, most unwillingly, upon Jacob's head. It must be a rigorous mind indeed which would call for a severer sentence upon a merely misguided partiality.

2. The punishment of Rebekah was of a different nature. The mysterious arrangements of an over-ruling Providence allowed her scheme, however artful in its contrivance, and however objectionable in the mode of its execution, to be crowned with success in no inconsiderable degree. Her desires, in their most important particular, in procuring "the blessing of Abraham" for Jacob, were certainly and signally fulfilled; because in this respect her wishes corresponded with the will of the Most High: and it would ill become the Holy One that inhabiteth eternity, to permit the presumption of his creatures, to break

the order of his decrees. But with this necessary exception there was not a single point in which evil did not follow her deceit as a natural and immediate consequence. Esau felt his disappointment too acutely not to be angry with its cause, and to obviate the effects of his merited, though excessive wrath, Jacob was obliged to be sent forth from his father's house, and never more did his mother behold him again. With the injured Esau was she compelled reluctantly to dwell, and from him she had no right to expect the affection of a child, or the sympathies of friendship. Fearful of the future she had yet none to whom she could communicate her fears, nor any to whom she could turn for counsel or for aid. In the multitude of her sorrows there was no one near her to comfort her, and if she wept at all, it must have been unpitied and alone. Thus did her calamities arise directly from her sin. Thus did even the success which she seemed to have obtained, become, as it were, unsuccessful in her hands, and for a future blessing she was made subject to a present curse. The rejected Esau, she beheld rejoicing, as if accepted, under the countenance of his father's favour, the heir of his substance, and the ruler over his house; whilst the accepted Jacob was cast forth, as if rejected, a fugitive and a wanderer in a distant land, the servant instead of the lord over his brethren.

3. Let us turn then, in the third place, to examine the judgement which overtook this supplanter of his brother, and contrast it with that supplanted brother's fate.

Now the prevailing character which runs through the incidents of Jacob's life is this, that his misfortunes were uniformly calculated to bring back to his recollection the picture as well as the punishment of his fault. By subtilty had he imposed upon Isaac, and by subtilty did Laban impose upon him. He had betrayed his father into the acceptance of the less, instead of the more beloved son; and by a father was he himself betrayed into the acceptance of the less, instead of the more beloved daughter. He had wounded the affections of another; and his own were deeply wounded in return. Isaac supposed it had been Esau, and he blessed him; but behold it was Jacob, and he was constrained to confirm the blessing. Jacob supposed it had been Rachel, and he married her; but behold it was Leah, and he was constrained to confirm the unwilling choice. Late was Rachel gained, and early was she lost, and as he had caused his father to grieve at beholding the promise descend to Jacob's, and not to Esau's seed, so was he also grieved in beholding the same promise continued in Leah's, and not in Rachel's

line:—for to Judah and not to Joseph was the sceptre given. Jacob had brought dissension into his father's family, and made him to see his sons at variance with each other, and the elder about to shed the younger's blood. So also was dissension brought into his own house, and hatred and variance and strife the bitter portion of his parental days. He had removed from his mother, for years, the son of her especial love; and Joseph the son of his own love, was for years to him as one dead. Instead of plenty of corn and wine, there was "famine in the land of Canaan," and "the famine was sore in the land," and Jacob was reduced to depend upon one of his own children for the very food which he did eat. Instead of being lord over his brethren, he saluted his brother as his lord; and instead of his mother's sons bowing down before him, the fulfilment of the promise was deferred to some yet distant generations, and in his own person he bowed down before his mother's son. To pursue him through every other sorrow of his days, and to observe each grief by which he was successively afflicted, may be left to the private hours of the believer. It is only necessary to remark in addition, that Jacob was deeply affected by the misfortunes he endured, and has borne a pathetic testimony to the melancholy colour of his life. Pharaoh

questioned him only as to the number of his days; but he could not refrain from mentioning their misery also, and declared that evil, as well as few, had the days of the years of his pilgrimage been, and had fallen incomparably short of the days of the years of his father's, both in their duration and their excellence.

A punishment so appropriate and characteristic of his fault, scarce needed the contrast of the injured Esau's prosperity and greatness to increase its weight. Yet this also was added to the positive afflictions of Jacob's life. For whilst he was flying in fear from the protection of his father's roof, and passed over Jordan with his staff alone for his possession and his stay; Esau remained in the plenty and presence of Isaac, the son of his love and the inheritor of his substance. Not one portion of his father's worldly goods seems ever to have fallen to Jacob's lot. If the Lord had not dealt graciously with his servant in his exile from the promised land, he would have returned as poor and as powerless as he left it. Even with all the mercies which had been shewn to him by his God, he still felt his inferiority to Esau, and trembled before his might, under the natural apprehension that he would remember his former injuries, and give way to his present opportunities of ven-

geance. "Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed^a," and confessing the sin of which he had been guilty, and his unworthiness of the least of the mercies which he had received, prayed unto the Lord that he would deliver him "from the hand of his brother, from the hand of Esau, for he feared him." In that prayer of penitence and humiliation he was heard and answered. The mother and the children were not smitten from the earth, because God had unequivocally promised that his seed should be "as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude^b." But with that limitation alone, the blessing which his subtilty had extorted from Isaac, was for the present, both in its letter and in its spirit reversed. A fulfilment of what Isaac had prophetically been empowered to utter there must needs be; but the fulfilment was finally removed from his person to his posterity, and he was honoured only with the knowledge that he had not altogether forfeited the privileges of which, in Abraham, he was the heir, but that at some period or other "all the families of the earth should still be blessed in his seed."

But why, it may be said, was he not really and altogether made to forfeit those privileges?

^a Gen. xxxii. 7, 11.

^b Gen. xxxii. 12.

Why had not retribution her perfect work? Esau sinned and was rejected. Why then was not Jacob also rejected, when Jacob also sinned? I would fain be silent where Scripture itself is silent, and with the humility becoming a man, would believe that it was all the work of God's wisdom which, being infinite, I cannot hope to fathom by the limits of my own narrow understanding. Or, if I must needs find an answer in this matter, I will send you again to the pages of St. Paul, first of all reminding you that the choice of God in this case extended not beyond what was necessary or expedient in order to make Jacob the father of the Messiah according to the flesh, and the rejection of Esau only to the depriving him of that privilege and its attendant consequences and superiority. With this caution in our view, we may once more recur to the Apostle's reasoning, and fearlessly assert, upon his authority, that as the choice was made before the children were born, and without respect to the conduct they might afterwards pursue, it would scarce have been consistent with the immutability of an Almighty Being, had he permitted that subsequent good or evil, which he must necessarily have foreseen, to influence him to a change in the determination he had previously pronounced and made. "The elder shall serve the younger," was said

to Rebekah whilst her sons yet struggled in her womb, and if “the purpose of God according to election was to stand,” it seems essential that the declaration should be fulfilled. Consequently the punishment of Jacob’s subtlety could not properly comprehend the recal of that declaration.

In every pious and considerate mind, reflections like these will no doubt be productive of their due effect. Those who have ever seriously allowed the inferiority of a finite to an infinite understanding, and been made acquainted with the improbability, nay perhaps the impossibility, of a creature’s being aware of all the circumstances which influences the Creator’s decrees, such men will perhaps acknowledge that when we have once fairly traced the election of Jacob to the pre-established arrangements of the Deity, we have reached a point where our powers of judgement must necessarily fail, and where we may safely rest our faith in the justice of God’s choice upon our general perception of the equity of his ordinary dealings with man. But there are some minds that cannot be so satisfied ; and by these we may be pressed with a still further question, and presumptuously required to decide, why God chose Jacob and gave the promise before he was born, when he

must have inevitably foreseen the deceit with which he would act towards Esau after he was born?

In over-curious and indeterminable speculations like these, I feel bound, neither by desire nor duty to engage; and those who do engage in them, will find that if persevered in upon almost any subject, they will ultimately lead them to the endless controversy upon the origin of evil, or perhaps to a doubt of the propriety of the creation of man at all. Declining, therefore, what is so plainly above my reach, I would merely answer the captious enquiry by demanding in return, why God has made one man poor and another rich? Why has Providence caused one man to be the father of a race of peasants, and another to be the father of a race of kings? God only knoweth, must be the reply to this: and God only knoweth, say also we, why he chose that the elder Esau should serve the younger Jacob in this world, and why the Messiah should spring from the loins of Jacob, rather than from the loins of Esau. The answer is equally to the purpose and effectual in both cases. For so long as we know, and we do know, that hereafter every man will be rewarded according to his works, it is not for us to inquire, or to repine, or to rebel, because we

have not the same privileges on earth, whether spiritual or temporal, as other men have. Whatever we be here, if hereafter we be blessed or cursed as we relatively deserve, there is no unrighteousness with God, God forbid. He has done what he would with his own, and as we can have no claim of merit to his favours, and his omniscience must be the best, indeed the only sufficient judge of the manner of disposing of them so as to produce the greatest good upon the whole, we are bound to deem what he has done to have been done wisely and in righteousness.

Yet whilst we thus rest upon this general reasoning, we cannot refrain from passing under review the respective characters of Esau and Jacob, and pointing out the peculiar fitness of the latter for effecting the purpose for which he was preferred. It was that he might become the progenitor of the chosen people, and the father of the promised seed, that Jacob was selected. In this the blessing of Abraham, which rested on him, has been found principally to consist, and one great object for which the Israelites were separated from the rest of the world was to preserve the knowledge of uncorrupted religion until, in the fulness of time, the Messiah himself should appear to bring life and truth and immortality to light through the Gospel. Which

then of these two brothers was most likely to secure the end proposed? Exalt the character of Esau, as you will, and you can never find any other virtues in his disposition than those of an amiable temper, a forgiving mind, and a moderation in prosperity. These are certainly very excellent and pleasing qualities, and made him not unworthy of the greatness to which he was personally raised. But when accompanied, as they were, by a carelessness towards his birth-right, through which alone the blessing of Abraham could have become his; when diminished, as they were, by his disregard of the irreligious tendency of the domestic connections which he formed, and the evidence which such conduct afforded of the little interest he felt for the preservation of the true knowledge, and pure worship of the Deity, all his moral amiableness must be considered as nothing to the purpose, and it must be candidly acknowledged that he was not a person upon whom much reliance could be placed as one who would "bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Degrade on the other hand, the character of Jacob as you will; condemn him as much as you can, for the subtilty of his conduct, and the mode in which he took advantage of his brother's faintness, you must still allow that the act was dictated by a pre-eminent reverence for

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the spiritual promises of which Isaac was the heir, and that in every incident of his life he displayed the fervour of his anxiety to obtain or retain them. For this he contended with the angel at Peniel, and would not let him go until he had blessed him; nor can any instance be discovered in which he did not mark his devotion to the true and only God, and shew forth a sense of the value of the mercies he had received, and his unworthiness to receive them. A feeling of humility, and an attention to spiritual things, the two best preservatives of our faith and piety towards God, are the distinctive characteristics of his disposition. Compare then these two beings together, remember the object for which the preference of the one to the other was made, namely, "that all the nations of the earth might be blessed in him;" then consider that one of the reasons which the Almighty himself has stated for choosing Abraham to the office was because "he knew him, that he would command his children, and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgement," and when you have fairly viewed the whole, ask yourselves which of the two individuals in question was most proper to be made the depository of those promises whose especial end was connected most intimately with the permanence of a pure faith. Was the profane and careless

Esau “who sold his birthright,” his best dependence, and his only hope, “for one morsel of meat,” the person to be relied upon in a matter of the last importance to religion? or was it not rather the steady Jacob, whose piety was proved not only to be a profession, but a reality, whose doctrine was both sound and firm, and whose faith and esteem for the blessing, he afterwards obtained, was visible in every act of his life? I presume not to say that the foreknowledge of this difference in their respective characters was the ground of the prediction, and the motive of the choice; for I dare not meddle with things so deep. But I would steadily assert, that since the election has actually been made, there is reason enough in the dispositions of Esau and Jacob, as manifested in their subsequent acts and conversation, to justify, for such a purpose, and on such an occasion, the propriety of the preference shewn to the latter. Be it that Esau was the more amiable man, yet Jacob was the more pious one, and it was piety, in this instance, which alone could constitute the fitness of the instrument.

Let us now recapitulate the remarks we have made, and placing them contiguously with the objections to which they are opposed, endeavour briefly to give a judgement upon the whole case.

It is objected, first, that Jacob's subtilty was justly condemnable, and what a wise and good man would greatly disapprove. We allow that it was so, and answer that this forms no objection to Scripture, because whatever holiness, in other respects, may be attributed to Jacob, Scripture never speaks of this act with commendation, whilst Moses, by calling it a subtilty, would seem to have given it a direct reproof.

It is objected, secondly, that this wrong action of Jacob was yet allowed to be successful, and he obtained the blessing which he sought by subtilty. We admit this also, and answer, that such is a common issue of actions in the world that now is, and that in the world to come, alone are we to look for a perfectly retributive state. But we observe further, that, in the example before us, retribution, rigid and appropriate, commenced even with the commission of the crime; that, personally at least, Jacob enjoyed nothing of what was promised, and that to himself the whole terms of the blessing were reversed, with the exception of that assurance vouchsafed to him by God, that "the blessing of Abraham" should still ultimately be his, and that "in his seed should all the families of the earth be blessed."

Here then, in the third place, it is asserted that this portion of the blessing ought also to have been reversed, and that retaliation should have been entire as well as signal. We allege in reply, that as the promise it is proposed to revoke was positively and unconditionally pronounced, the unchangeableness of the Divine Being could scarce admit of its being violated. Upon this we rest; but if we are still further pressed with an inquiry, why such an unconditional promise should have been made by a Being who must have foreknown the conduct the object of the declaration would pursue, we beg leave to decline the question as presumptuous and indeterminable by man, whose ignorance and incapacity cannot possibly appreciate that combination of circumstances, past, present, and to come, by which the 'determinations of Omniscience are regulated. Thinking thus modestly ourselves, we would yet represent to the objector that either Esau or Jacob, as being the only sons of Isaac, must necessarily have been chosen, and that, considering the purpose for which the election was made, Jacob was evidently the fitter of the two. The objector has no right therefore to assert that the preference was given without there being "any thing in reason and nature to be the ground of that preference."

Thus would we endeavour to satisfy, if possible, those that doubt; whilst upon those that believe we would strenuously urge the moral of the whole. If Jacob, we would say, the elect of the Lord; if Jacob who “as a prince had power with God and with men;” if he to whom appertained “the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants,” was yet made to suffer severely and long for the evil that he had done, how strong is the warning to us less-distinguished individuals against being beguiled into any deceit, and expecting to escape the penalty which is due to our sin. Let “no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter, because that the Lord is the avenger of all such.” This is the instruction conveyed to us by this history; and this is evidently the instruction our Church intended us to draw from it, because on that very day^a on which she has taken the account of Jacob’s subtilty for the lesson, she has selected for the epistle that portion of Scripture which contains the sentence I have just read,—a sentence “of reproof, and of correction in righteousness,” which we should do well to have continually in our hearts. For to few, as to the Thessalonians, can it be said that “as touching brotherly love there is no need that we should write unto them.”

^a Second Sunday in Lent:

LECTURE XVIII.

 JOSEPH'S CONDUCT TO HIS BRETHREN.

 PART I.

GEN. XLII. 25, 26.

“ Then Joseph commanded to fill their sacks with corn, and to restore every man's money into his sack, and to give them provision for the way: and thus did he unto them. . . . And they laded their asses with the corn, and departed thence.”

THAT portion of the Mosaic history which I am now about to consider, is the conduct of Joseph to his brethren, when, under the pressure of famine, they came down into Egypt to buy corn, and found him whom, in envy they had sold as a slave to the Ishmaelites, become “a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land.” It is not, however, with a view of removing any moral difficulties which infidels have found or imagined on this subject, that I have selected it for present discussion. The whole story is so beautifully natural, and recommends itself so

strongly to the tastes and feelings of humanity, that even the scoffer has forgotten to sneer, and condescended to praise both its elegance and its purity. My desire is rather, on the other hand, to remove those obscurities and misapprehensions by which the carelessness or inaccuracy of divines has too often dimmed the brightness of this story's excellence. For nothing is unfortunately more common than to find the conduct of the Patriarch degraded or misunderstood, by attributing his actions, either to no motive at all, or to some motive entirely unworthy of his wisdom and holiness. A few observations will be sufficient to shew both how this has arisen, and to what mistakes we allude.

It is usual to illustrate the rules of the drama in its most perfect form, by a reference to the history of the vicissitudes of Joseph's life. Nothing could be more appropriately selected for the purpose; because such an appeal to the realities of human existence shews, not only that the doctrines of critics are such, as if carried into effect, would produce the requisite impressions of terror, and pity, and surprise; but also that they are legitimately founded upon some of the most authentic and interesting occurrences which have actually befallen individuals in this fluctuating world. Thus we are taught to bow

to these critical dictates not only as they come recommended by their ingenuity and good sense, or because they have been practised with success by the most eminent poets of every age; but also because they are rooted and grounded in truth, as well as illustrated in the best fictions of the human imagination.

It might bear the appearance of being "righteous over-much," were we to proscribe universally the application of sacred subjects to the embellishment or explanation of the compositions of profane literature; but we may be permitted to remark that, in the case now under our review, the practice has led to some mistakes of an important kind, and blinded several commentators to the perception of the real object of Joseph in many of his proceedings. Looking upon the history as dramatic in its construction, some have been misguided enough to judge of the words and actions of the Patriarch as if they were the words and actions of some theatrical personage, and to suppose he was influenced in his conduct by a regard to dramatic effect. This is particularly the fault of one very estimable writer of undoubted piety. Stackhouse, to whom I allude, is unguarded enough to defend the various delays by which Joseph kept his brethren in ignorance of his relation towards

them, and his successive demonstrations of assumed harshness and suspicion, by stating that such concealment and severity “did eventually produce a great deal of good ; and was, in reality, no more than the heightening the distress, or thickening the plot, (as we call it in a play) to make the discovery or future felicity he intended his family, more conspicuous and agreeable^a.” With such a principle of interpretation in his mind, it is scarce to be wondered that he should have referred the Patriarch’s wise dealings to the most frivolous reasons. Thus he explains Joseph’s accusation of his brethren as spies come down to see the nakedness of the land, as originating in no better view than this,—that “being minded to terrify them a little, he would not, as yet, discover himself to them^b.” When Joseph for the first time dismissed his brethren with corn for their own and their household’s use, and put each man’s money in his sack, Stackhouse can trace it to no higher source than that of its being done “as a fresh matter of surprise^c.” But when they were dismissed the second time with corn, and in addition to their money, the cup also was secreted, by Joseph’s order, in Benjamin’s sack, this writer becomes still more objectionable. For instead

^a Stackhouse’s History of the Bible, vol: I. p. 358, fol.

^b Ibid. p. 334.

^c Ibid. p. 335.

of seeking out for some hidden and peculiar motive sufficient to account for so singular an artifice, he seems to feel no difficulty at all; and, apparently unaware of the necessity of giving a grave and adequate explanation of such seeming inconsistency of conduct, he very calmly and confidently observes, that "Joseph had one fright more for them." Full of the idea of a dramatic plot, he reasons, or rather forgets to reason, as if nothing else were requisite than to make the Patriarch play a part which should terminate, by some means or other, in the production of a foreseen and designed catastrophe. Few will be satisfied with such meagre commentaries: fewer still will be persuaded to adopt them, when they have been once fairly examined and traced back to their origin. Nor would it have been worth the time and labour thus expended in collecting and exposing such manifest errors, had they not, as I believe, obtained, in some modified shape, a considerable degree of prevalence, and been found also, though not indeed to the same extent, in the *Contemplations* of Bishop Hall, a writer of still higher attainments and reputation than the one already mentioned. Upon Joseph's conduct in general, Hall observes that "sporting himself in their seeming misery, he pleasantly imitates all those actions reciprocally unto his brethren, which

they in despite and earnest had done formerly to him ; he speaks roughly, rejects their persuasions, puts them in hold, and one of them in bonds^a." When he afterwards comes to the incident of Benjamin's sack, his language is such as to seem to have suggested that of Stackhouse. " Thus Joseph," he says, " would yet dally with his brethren, and make Benjamin a thief, that he might make him a servant, and fright his brethren with the peril of that their charge, that he might double their joy and amazedness, by giving them two brothers at once^b."

Whatever may be the authority of the names by which opinions like these are supported, it can scarce overcome their natural improbability. It can scarce prevail with any, who venture to think for themselves, to believe that motives so frivolous would have operated so long and powerfully upon an individual, even of common sense and feeling, in real life. That they should have influenced in this manner a Patriarch so pre-eminently wise and amiable, is, of course, yet more incredible. That Joseph, whose insight into the secrets of Providence, had raised him from a prison to a palace, whose prudence had never forsaken him under temptations the most seductive, whose domestic affections were lively, whose tenderness

^a Hall's Contemplations, Book III. Contemp. 5.

^b Ibid.

melting, and whose temper generous,—that such a man should so trifle with the feelings of his brethren, and the anxieties of his father; that he should torture them with the unjust accusation of spies, and send them back again, in affliction and fear, upon an almost needless journey into Palestine; and that, when they returned, he should, up to the very moment of revealing himself, rebuke, and grieve and distract and terrify their souls,—that he should do all this for the mere purpose of making his own subsequent discovery of his real character more striking; or the revolution in the fortunes of his family more sensibly felt; or even sportively to inflict a sort of judicial retribution for a former fault,—this representation of the matter is so contrary to all our reasonable expectations, that it would be difficult indeed to establish its truth. Ask any one to state in what manner he supposed Joseph would have acted upon such an occasion, and this, under the view here taken of it, is undoubtedly not the manner he would describe. But the great defect of this representation is in its incapacity to account for the repeated earnestness with which Joseph, after he had revealed himself to his brethren, expressed his conviction that the finger of Providence had directed the whole, and that the hand of heaven had led him into Egypt for his family's benefit. “God,” says he to his brethren, “sent me before

you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save you by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God." Upon this declaration of the Patriarch, the Contemplations of Bishop Hall are silent; for of its force and pertinency his views upon the subject could give no clear account. If from the first Joseph intended to act as he afterwards did, from the first he must have seen the purposes of Providence: and how, after having seen them, he could reconcile it to himself to delay their accomplishment, it is hard to conceive.

But it is not enough thus to have pointed out the mistakes of these writers. It should be our endeavour to supply their defects by a careful and connected review of the story, and its circumstances. Something of this has indeed already been done by later divines^a, but not enough to supersede a more detailed exemplification of the principles on which Joseph acted.

The historian informs us that Joseph knew his brethren from the first moment of their appearance before him; but that they knew not him. "Joseph saw his brethren, and he knew them, but made himself strange unto them, and spake roughly unto them; and he said, Whence

^a See Maltby's Sermons, vol. I. Sermon 2.

come ye?" Nothing could be more natural. His last interview with them was at the pit; his last request to them for his life: and it had failed. Reuben's prayers, and not his own, had saved him alive. He besought them, but they would not hear. He stretched forth his hands unto them, but they would not regard. They saw the anguish of his soul, but were touched with no pity for his distress. He must have been either more, or less than man, then, had he not retained the remains of a just and indignant remembrance of what he experienced at their hands. He must have wanted the universal feelings of our common nature, had he not, at first, "made himself strange unto them, and spoken roughly unto them."

But nature prompted another feeling also in Joseph,—a desire to ascertain the present situation of his father and his family; especially of his brother Benjamin, who alone had not participated in his brethren's cruelty, and who, as well as himself, was subject to their hatred. Therefore "he said, Whence come ye?" Therefore he "asked them straitly of their state, and of their kindred, saying, Is your father yet alive? have ye another brother?"

Joseph's knowledge of his brethren, and their

ignorance of him, afforded him a manifest advantage in instituting those inquiries, which he thought necessary, with regard to the state of his father's house. Still, however, it was expedient to quench every possible suspicion in their minds as to the peculiar interest he took in ascertaining the truth, lest by inspiring caution, he might prevent a free and full communication of their affairs. To obtain, therefore, a candid and unreserved statement, and not to "terrify them a little," before he discovered himself to them, his wisdom devised the accusation against them as spies. And Joseph "said unto them, Ye are spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come."

A charge so unjust, unexpected, and improbable, and which, as Joseph might easily foresee, would best be refuted by a plain statement of the honest truth, threw caution completely aside, and in defence of their conscious innocence, they said, "Thy servants are no spies. Thy servants are twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is not." In these words Joseph was informed of two most interesting facts; that his father was yet alive, and that his brother Benjamin was yet alive,—his only brother indeed; for he was his mother's only other son, and she had been long dead. Though the

manner in which the statement had been elicited, and the known correctness of a part of it seemed strongly to imply the correctness of the remainder, yet, remembering his brethren's former treatment of himself, and aware of a certain degree of ambiguity in their words (which we shall afterwards notice), Joseph appears not to have been by any means satisfied; especially with regard to his brother Benjamin. Why had not Benjamin accompanied his brethren? Why, if living, was he alone left behind? There was something ominous in his absence which no mere questioning could clear up; because inquiry, by raising the suspicions would prevent the sincerity of his brethren. To relieve his mind, therefore, and "verify their words," and bring Benjamin, if alive, into Egypt, he "took from them Simeon," and bound him "before their eyes" as a hostage, until they should return with their youngest brother.

The total silence of Joseph with respect to Jacob, is very remarkable in this part of the transaction. Upon Benjamin alone does his mind seem fixed; to Benjamin alone do his plans and words refer. "Hereby," said Joseph, "shall ye be proved: by the life of Pharaoh, ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither." The coming of his father would equally

have proved them ; yet his name is neither introduced nor hinted at. "Send one of you," he continues, "and let him fetch your brother." His father is again omitted. "Go ye," he adds once more, "carry corn for the famine of your houses ;" not, as we should have expected, for your father's house. This omission is still more singular in the account which was given to Jacob himself by his sons. "The man," thus they related the treatment they had met with, "the lord of the country said unto us, Take food for the famine of your households." Had Joseph made any allusion to his father, surely it would have been noticed here. But we read only "of your," and not as we should have supposed, "of your," and your father's "households." Lastly, Joseph says, "Bring your youngest brother unto me : so shall your words be verified, and ye shall not die." Their words could not be completely verified, unless they brought their father, as well as their youngest brother, with them : for they had asserted their father's, quite as positively as their youngest brother's, existence. But whilst Benjamin is spoken of in every sentence, thought of in every place, Jacob is passed over with a sort of studied neglect.

This exclusive interest in Benjamin, and apparent inattention to Jacob may, I think, be

reasonably accounted for, by supposing Joseph to have been not at all convinced; to have been, perhaps, almost altogether unbelieving, with regard to his father's existence. Could it be possible that Jacob had so long survived so many miseries; and that his strength had not been broken, and his days shortened by the calamity of Joseph's loss: Joseph, who was the child of his Rachel and his love, and in whose life, as Judah said of Benjamin, his life was bound up? It was a thing very little credible, that a life of evil and suffering should have been thus prolonged: and perhaps, like the Apostles after the resurrection, Joseph could scarce credit the report, because of its strangeness, and his joy. His brethren, besides, had only said, that their "youngest brother was that day with their father." But where? In Canaan, or in the grave? There was an ambiguity in the expression which might be intentional, and which the equivocal manner in which they spoke of Joseph himself, as of one that was not, might easily lead him to misinterpret. When Jacob's sons afterwards recounted to him their adventures, they, indeed, removed the ambiguity, by saying, that they had told "the lord of the land," that their youngest brother was that day with their father "in the land of Canaan." So, no doubt, they meant to imply; but they had not expressly stated it; and Joseph hence doubted,

and durst not, for fear of betraying himself, more directly request them to explain. But even, if he had not mistaken their meaning, he might yet reject their veracity. Sad experience had taught him that they *could* deviate from the laws of rectitude and truth; and why then should he trust them in this improbable thing? Benjamin might live; for he was young. Jacob, for many reasons, hardly could. If Jacob still lived, no doubt he was still cherished and revered by his children, and might, consequently, be safely permitted to continue in the land of Canaan, under their care. If Benjamin lived, his absence might argue his being degraded and hated by his brethren, or sold perhaps, like Joseph himself, into slavery. To assure himself, therefore, that Benjamin lived; to see him, and hear him declare the treatment he had experienced; and, if injured, to rescue him from his persecutors, may be regarded as a natural source of the extreme interest displayed for him; whilst the seeming forgetfulness of Jacob, may be considered as arising from a partial, if not full persuasion that death had closed his calamities, or that, if it had not, he was in no danger of unkind treatment from his sons.

As soon as Joseph had explained to his brethren his intention of detaining Simeon, till Benjamin was brought safe into Egypt; “they

said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us." Hitherto Joseph had heard no words of sorrow and regret for their cruelty towards himself. In speaking of him they had briefly said, "He is not." Seeing, therefore, no repentance, he had felt as yet no relentings from his just resentment. But the beginning of their penitence was the beginning of his tenderness: "and he wept;" yet without departing from his original purpose of detaining Simeon, and compelling them to bring Benjamin. For in their communings with each other they had said nothing more concerning Benjamin, than they had already told him. Upon that point, then, he was left in nearly the same doubt as before, and, consequently, it was not prudent to relinquish the plan he had formed for ascertaining their real conduct and feelings towards Benjamin. It was still expedient to have a personal interview with Benjamin, and for that purpose to bring him, if possible, into Egypt. On this account, and not merely to "dally with his brethren," Joseph refrained himself before them, and, though he wept, yet he "turned himself about from them" to weep. Prudence, however, though it prevented the renunciation of his plan, and the discovery of his real name and character,

did not prohibit his making every demonstration of kindness, not inconsistent with the necessary secrecy. The corn, therefore, which he had before only proposed to sell to them, he now, in his own mind, determined to give. "Then," and not till then, says Moses, "Joseph commanded to fill their sacks with corn, *and* to restore every man's money into his sack, *and* to give them provision for the way. And thus did he [unto them]," as at once a relief to his own feelings, and a result of his conviction of their returning penitence. They, indeed, misapprehended his meaning, and when they saw their money "their heart failed them, and they were afraid." So also were they afterwards "afraid," when "they were brought into Joseph's house" to "dine with him at noon." But though fear was the impression produced upon their minds, the motive of Joseph, in both instances, was kind.

Impressed, however, with the singularity of this return of the money, most readers are apt to consider it as of particular importance, and to imagine it had some very peculiar and recondite intention. But no use was ever afterwards made of it, nor does much weight appear justly due to it. When it was mentioned to Joseph's steward upon the second arrival of the sons of Jacob in Egypt, he said, "Fear not: your God, and the


God of your fathers, hath given you treasure in your sacks: I had your money." Thus, without further consequences or remark, the matter ended. Perhaps, therefore, it may be sufficient to explain it in the manner already done, namely, as an act of generosity and kindness at parting. And thus "they laded their asses with corn, and departed thence."

Throughout the whole, then, of this first visit of his brethren, there is not any thing in the conduct of Joseph, either objectionable or theatrical, or without a satisfactory cause. In every thing that he did, he had definite, and dignified, and intelligible views. It was not for the purpose of "terrifying his brethren a little before he discovered himself to them," that he accused them as spies; but because it afforded an unsuspecting mode of obtaining from them that information with regard to their family which he most anxiously desired, but which, had they been aware of his solicitude, they might not have been so ready to communicate with sincerity. Upon the information thus given was founded his next stratagem, in which he "put them all in hold, and one of them in bonds;" not, however, for the frivolous purpose of pleasantly imitating all those actions reciprocally unto them, which they in despite and earnest had done formerly unto him;" but in

order to verify their statements, by bringing Benjamin into Egypt, if alive. Neither was it "as a fresh matter of surprise," that he restored each man's money into his sack; but as an act of generosity, and a mark of kindness. Thus do reason and reflection appear to have guided his plans; nor can we detect any real proof of his having conducted himself upon some supposed notions of retribution, and dramatic effect. No sooner, indeed, is such an idea introduced, than several things become inexplicable, or incapable of defence. If it was his purpose to bring his whole family into Egypt, and he only deferred its execution until he had "heightened their distress" up to the point necessary for making "their future felicity more agreeable," why did he ever send his brethren away at all; since it was possible, at least, that they might never return to receive that future felicity. If it was his intention, from the first, to discover himself to his brethren, and his accusations and harshness had no other object than that of punishing them for their former cruelty, and want of mercy towards himself, why did he involve his father also in that suffering, since his father, at least, had never been deficient in affection and tenderness towards him? For under this view of the case, he is conceived to have believed his father to be alive, and we cannot, therefore, resort to his doubts

upon that point for a solution. But if he more than feared that Jacob, and half suspected that even Benjamin was not alive, his silence about his father is no longer a difficulty, and his sending away his brethren with an order to return with Benjamin, would answer his purpose, whatever might be the issue. For if they returned, all he desired to learn would become known to him; and if they returned not, he would of course consider his suspicions confirmed, and feel little or no regret at never again beholding the face of beings so cruel and unjust. But they did return. They "came with double money; and Benjamin", and a new scene of action began, which I shall endeavour to vindicate in the next Discourse. In the mean time it will be sufficient to observe, that thus far Joseph's conduct is in all respects reasonable; and that his proceedings were successively suggested and regulated by circumstances, and may be justified by a reference to the ordinary principles of human action, and the ordinary feelings of human nature. He beholds unexpectedly before him the beings who had most injured him, and, being a man of like passions with ourselves, he remembers the injury, and speaks harshly unto them. They betray symptoms of regret and godly sorrow for their sin, and then he relents into tenderness, and would perhaps have revealed himself at once, had

he not been prevented by a regard to other necessary considerations. Happy they who have never felt more of resentment towards their persecutors than Joseph did ; and blessed indeed are they who can lift up their voices in prayer to Heaven with the same confidence as Joseph, and say, Forgive me, Lord, as thou knowest that I have forgiven others, and shew to me the mercy with which I have visited them.



LECTURE XIX.

JOSEPH'S CONDUCT TO HIS BRETHREN.

PART II.

GEN. XLV. 4, 7, 8.

“ Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. . . . And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. . . . So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God.”

We left the brethren of Joseph very sorrowfully departing from Egypt laden with corn, yet sad of heart, and returning unto their father with their money indeed in their sacks, but without Simeon in their company, and with a command to return with Benjamin also. It was not, however, until the famine had become “sore in the land, and they had eaten up the corn which they had brought out of Egypt,” that Jacob though repeatedly urged and reasoned with upon the subject could be prevailed upon to part with Benjamin upon any terms : and even then it was with very great reluctance and regret. But

whatever might be the bitterness of his father's grief, Joseph cannot be fairly considered as in any degree responsible for his sufferings. He was indeed the cause of his sorrows, but he was their innocent cause. He had done all in his power, by the united wisdom and humanity of his plan, to hasten the return of his brethren into Egypt; and if they were regardless of Simeon's bondage it was contrary to all his reasonable expectations, and neither the desire nor the fault of the delay was with him. Strong necessity however at length forced from the father of Joseph an unwilling assent to his demands, and his brethren appeared in his presence once more to bow before him as their lord, and in fulfilment of his dreams. "They came with double money in their hand, and Benjamin."

It is impossible but that the long and unexpected delay in the return of his brethren must necessarily and very materially have strengthened Joseph's doubt of their veracity, and his suspicions of the evil which their envy and cruelty might have inflicted upon Benjamin. But all those anxieties and fears were now at an end. His mother's son stood before him amongst the rest, and every lingering apprehension of his slavery or death was for ever removed. Satisfactory however as was this demonstration

of the truth of what the sons of Jacob had asserted with regard to Benjamin, what they had asserted with regard to the existence of Jacob remained still unconfirmed and still liable to doubt. Why, if he were alive, had Jacob thus permitted his whole family to be torn away from him, and not rather preferred to share with them in their evil, if evil was indeed appointed to befall them. It was strange that, under any circumstances, he should thus leave them to meet their perils alone; but it was stranger still under the peculiar circumstances of the present separation. When Joseph had commanded his brethren to verify their words by the personal appearance of their youngest brother, they had pleaded against the fulfilment of the command the misery which his absence would inevitably bring upon their aged father. They declared that so strong was the affection of Jacob to the lad, and so lively his fears for his welfare and life, that "if the lad should leave his father, his father would die." But Joseph had doubted the truth of their statement, and acted in consequence without any regard to his father's alleged existence or sufferings. He had persevered in requiring the appearance of his youngest brother, and, behold, his youngest brother appeared. The lad had now left his father. Had then his father died, and was that

the melancholy reason why he had not accompanied his child? Or had the existence and strength of Jacob's affection for Benjamin been a mere fiction of his brethren to evade the performance of what was so strongly required at their hands? Reflections like these could not but spring up amidst the meditations of Joseph's mind, and we consequently find that the very first question with which he opened this second interview between his brethren and himself was directed to the determination of this interesting point. "And he said, Is your father well? The old man of whom ye speak, is he yet alive?" Paley has very beautifully illustrated the testimony which these repeated questions bear to the filial piety of Joseph. But they quite as powerfully display the strength of his filial anxieties and fears; and except we permit these anxieties and fears to occupy at least half our consideration in the present instance, we shall rob the enquiry of the principal part of its propriety and force. Except we conceive the piety which suggested the question to have been chastened by a dread of the answer it might receive, we shall appreciate but very imperfectly either the meaning of the words, or the tone and feelings with which they were pronounced. "Is your father well," said he, or is it the sickness of sorrow which has indeed fallen upon him as ye told

me that it would, and compelled him to send this child of his love into the midst of danger alone? "The old man of whom ye spake, is he yet alive," or has the unhappy plan which I imagined to be for good, brought down the hand of death upon his infirmities and age? This is the fulness of his intention in the words, and unless we enter into the mingled nature of those fears and feelings by which he was oppressed when he uttered them, we shall never thoroughly be able to understand their import, or to form a correct opinion of the conduct he subsequently pursued.

It is a pity that the brethren of Joseph did not meet his earnestness at this critical moment with a corresponding openness and candour of reply. For had they told him in their answer how he himself was regretted, and how his supposed loss had struck the root of love for Benjamin still deeper into his father's heart, and how hard had been their task to persuade their father, and how great was his sorrow, and how many were his fears, all these things would have wrought the same effect now which, when urged so beautifully by Judah, they afterwards wrought, and the Patriarch would have been at once revealed to them, and their uncertainties and anxieties been terminated in immediate reconci-

liation and joy. Such openness however it was impossible and would have been most unwise to exhibit in the situation in which they stood. For they knew not what evil might lurk in the motives of the question; but they did know the unfortunate consequences which had attended the communication they had formerly made to the same individual, and they had a strong recollection of the rebuke they had received from their father for having made such a communication at all. With that cold caution, therefore, which such recollections and circumstances naturally inspired, their reply was conveyed in terms the most concise it was possible to frame. "They answered and said, Thy servant our father is in good health, he is yet alive." This was all that they answered and said. Not a single circumstance did they add to gratify the eager curiosity of the person they addressed. Not a single allusion did they make to the reason of their delayed return, or the grief and reluctance of Jacob at parting with Benjamin, or his extreme anxiety lest the younger, like the elder child of Rachel, should meet with mischief by the way, and fill up the measure of an old and an afflicted man's woes. All this interesting and important information was withheld, and the letter and not the spirit of the enquiry regulated the reply. What satisfactory conclusion, then, could Joseph

possibly form? They had before asserted that “if the lad left his father, his father would die.” They now acknowledged that, though “the lad had left his father,” his father was yet in good health and yet alive. They distinctly allowed that the evil they had so confidently prognosticated had not ensued. Jacob was not dead, was not even in the sickness of affliction. Such were the apparently contradictory statements they had made. What reliance then could fairly be placed upon their answer to any further question Joseph might propose? or in what manner was their seeming inconsistency to be reconciled? Were they now falsely maintaining their father’s existence and health, or had they before been guilty of exaggerating the strength of his affection, and the greatness of his fears for Benjamin? Were either of their assertions true, and, if either, to which of the two was the preference to be assigned? Doubts like these must necessarily have occurred to Joseph’s mind, and to remove the difficulties under which he laboured, and to determine both what he was to believe, and how he was to act with regard to his father, would naturally become the object of his immediate and most earnest attention. To obtain therefore this interesting and essential information, and to remove the ambiguities which the cautious brevity and suspicions of his brethren had left with regard to

the real feelings and situation of Jacob, we shall find to have been the direct intention of the second artifice which Joseph devised, and which we are now, in the third place, to consider and explain.

The plan, then, upon which we are informed that the Patriarch determined upon the present occasion was this. "He commanded the steward of his house, saying, Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put every man's money in his sack's mouth." Thus far he only imitated his previous conduct; but he now also added, "And put my cup, the silver cup, in the sack's mouth of the youngest." And the man did according to the word that Joseph had spoken. The plan being thus prepared for execution, his brethren were no sooner gone out of the city in the morning, than Joseph again summoned his steward and commanded him immediately to follow, to overtake, to accuse, and to search them, and to make him with whom the cup was found his servant, and to consider the rest as blameless, and consequently free. "And he overtook them, and he spake unto them these same words, and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack."

Such is an outline of the artifice, and it is

impossible to imagine a contrivance more certain of producing the end proposed, whatever might be the effect produced upon his brethren by its execution. If Jacob really lived, and had really been grieved to part with Benjamin, nothing could be better calculated to ascertain that point than the injunction which Joseph had given to his steward to bring back that individual alone with whom the cup was found. For when the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, the rest of his brethren, if they were indeed conscious of the affection of their father for this favoured child, and certain that the loss of Benjamin would "bring down his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave," would naturally return to plead for his liberation or share his fate. For what consolation could they possibly afford to sooth their father's calamity? To say that Benjamin had been justly detained by the "lord of the land" as a punishment for the wickedness of his ingratitude, is what they could never truly assert, for it was what they could never for a moment believe. From the first they must have felt convinced that the same hand which had twice restored their money, had also in this instance secreted the cup. The almost inevitable result, then, of this artifice, if there was any truth in what the sons of Jacob had stated in their former interview would be this, that they would

return with Benjamin, they would intercede for Benjamin, and breaking the silence which they had hitherto so unfortunately maintained upon the particulars of Jacob's reluctance in consenting to the separation, display before Joseph the real feelings of his father. If, on the other hand, Jacob was not yet alive, or if his sons had declared that "if the lad should leave his father, his father would die," merely as a means of evading the necessity of bringing up Benjamin into Egypt, most happy would they be in that case to be permitted to escape with their liberty, and most ready to leave Benjamin to endure his supposed bondage alone. But, at any rate, whether his brethren returned or no, and whether they did or did not communicate with sincerity the information he required, the detention of Benjamin still afforded him a certain opportunity, and a most undoubted means of learning with accuracy those facts with respect to his father and his family which he so much and so naturally desired to know. For Benjamin had never injured him, and Benjamin had nothing to fear from his power, and every thing to hope for from his love. The only thing, therefore, which seemed necessary for Joseph, was, by a discovery of himself to Benjamin alone, to make him sensible of the legitimate interest he took in obtaining a statement, and he had then a

certainty of receiving a full, a candid, and an immediate explanation upon every point. That information being once obtained, he would then be in a capacity to determine what course he should pursue, and whether he should make himself known, and become useful to his family in their distress.

We have now seen that the cautious brevity with which the brethren of Joseph answered his enquiries, and a seeming inconsistency between their present answer and their former assertions, naturally renewed his suspicions and doubts with regard to the real situation and existence of his father. We have also seen that these suspicions and doubts induced him to practice a second artifice towards his brethren, the direct object of which was to ascertain the fate of his father, with as much certainty as he had already by a previous artifice ascertained his brother's fate: and we have further shewn that the second contrivance was calculated, like the first, to secure his object with as little perplexity and as much expedition as perhaps the nature of the circumstances would permit. It only now remains for us to examine the effect which the plan actually produced, and the manner in which it operated upon each individual concerned.

We may observe, then, in continuing our analysis of the story, that when the brethren were accused of "rewarding evil for good," and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, they unanimously refused to be considered blameless, and returned once more with their brother to the city to become the bondmen of the prince, and share the fate and the misery of Benjamin. "And Judah said, Behold we are my lord's servants, both we and he also with whom the cup is found." Manifest as was the sincerity of these words, we yet find not that the purpose of the Patriarch was changed. "And he said, The man in whose hands the cup is found, he shall be my servant; and as for you get you up in peace unto your father."

What was the tone and manner in which this determination was pronounced, it is impossible to say. Whether by his actions or his voice Joseph intimated to his brethren the doubts he entertained, and the difficulties he had felt, in reconciling their various declarations with regard to his father, we cannot tell; but certain it is, that no sooner had the word "father" been uttered, than Judah once more pressed forward, and in terms of the most unpretending earnestness, and pathetic sincerity, declared his readiness "to abide instead of the lad." "*Then*," says Moses, "Judah

came near unto Joseph," and in a speech of such careless and inimitable beauty, and with arguments so persuasive, and tenderness so touching, urged home his suit upon the reason and the feelings of the Patriarch, that, whatever might have been his previous intentions, whatever his premeditated views, all his resolutions were broken by the resistless impulses of nature, and he could no longer refrain or conceal himself before them all. "And he wept aloud, and said unto his brethren, I am Joseph, doth my father yet live?"

It has been usual to consider this whole artifice to have been designed by Joseph to try the affection of his brethren towards Benjamin. It was undoubtedly his object in their former visit to determine whether they had done actual violence to the only remaining child of Rachel, and therefore he demanded his presence in Egypt. But I cannot be persuaded to think that it was his sole, or even his principal object in the plan which is now under our review, still further to probe the nature of their fraternal feelings towards their youngest brother. For if that was really his purpose, it does not seem consistent with his conduct throughout. For why then did he not discover himself when Judah and his brethren first returned and informed him of their

unanimous resolution to share the bondage of Benjamin. In this *all* the brothers united to display their sentiments—and Joseph relented not. Surely their interest in Benjamin had now been sufficiently proved, and it seems difficult upon this supposition to say why he still remained unmoved. But it is still more difficult, upon this supposition, to account for his afterwards yielding to the peculiar intercession of Judah. Judah's offer related only to himself as a substitute for Benjamin, and how such an offer was to prove the affection of the rest more than it had hitherto been proved, it is hard to conceive. Nor do we find any thing in the tenor of Judah's speech which in any way marks their love for Benjamin to have been either particularly sincere or strong. The burthen of Judah's grief lay in his fear that if Benjamin returned not from Egypt, his *father's* gray hairs would be brought down with sorrow to the grave. His plea for offering himself was, not that he himself so loved Benjamin that he could not bear to see him in bonds, but that he had become "surety for the lad unto his father." And the prayer for his own detention instead of Benjamin, was founded, not on his own estimate of the value of Benjamin's life, but on the impossibility of his "going up to his father, if the lad were not with him, lest peradventure he

should see the evil that should come upon his father." His father seems almost alone present in Judah's thoughts. Every argument is drawn from his father's feelings, every appeal is grounded on his father's grief, and his father's name is in every line, recurring with a frequency of repetition which under any other circumstances would have ruined the eloquence of whose beauty and whose force it now forms the principal part. It is filial, therefore, and not fraternal affection which pervades the whole. It was filial, therefore, and not fraternal affection, by the display of which the feelings of the Patriarch were so irresistibly kindled; and the moment we take the view of the subject, we find the whole conduct of the Patriarch explained. Joseph doubted whether his father still lived, or, if alive, whether he still retained the same lively interest in the children of Rachel which he had once done; and these doubts arose from the difficulty he experienced in reconciling some apparent inconsistencies in the statements of his brethren. When Judah stepped forth to make known their general resolution to share in Benjamin's bonds, undeniable as was the kindness and generosity of the proposition, Joseph still remained undiscovered, because his difficulties were not solved, nor his doubts removed. His father was still not mentioned,

and consequently he was still left in the same darkness as before upon that which he most wished to hear. But when Judah afterwards proceeded to a minute and circumstantial detail of the whole course of their proceedings with their father, and all the grief their father had felt, and all the anguish their father still endured, and all the despair with which the detention of the lad would overwhelm the decaying strength and declining days of their father, the case was then completely altered. In every part of Judah's statement, the existence of his father was taken for granted, in every argument Jacob's unabated love for Joseph and for Benjamin was implied, and in every sentence his sorrow was painted and his death foreboded, if Benjamin were retained: and all these things were so urged as to defy incredulity. It was impossible to resist the conviction of truth so told, and, "Doth my father yet live," seems to have been the last expiring effort of difficulty and doubt. The assertion of his father being "yet alive," now came in such an unquestionable shape, that it would have been criminal any longer to resist the fact. There remained, therefore, but the three following courses of conduct to pursue: to release Benjamin out of his sight; or to run the risk of shortening his father's days; or to discover himself at once to his whole family, and send them

down to Jacob the harbingers of joy. To a feeling and affectionate mind like that of Joseph, no time was required for deliberation. He bowed to the law of circumstances and confessed himself, "And he said unto his brethren, I am Joseph. Haste ye and go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not: and thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, and I will nourish thee, lest thou and thy household, and all that thou hast come to poverty."

Thus have we endeavoured at once to vindicate and explain the conduct of Joseph in his conduct to his brethren. We have shewn against the enemy of revelation that none of his proceedings originated either in resentment or caprice, and defended him to the best of our power from the misapprehensions of those divines who would represent his motives to have been a desire of retribution or effect. At the same time we have endeavoured to point out the principles by which we conceive him to have been really guided, and to prove that in every thing he acted as in every thing a wise man would wish to act; in a manner always natural, and always dictated and regulated by the circumstances

which occurred. For this purpose we have followed him through each successive interview and each successive artifice, and found in all, the marks of an understanding spirit and the best moral virtues, of filial piety and fraternal affection, of a forgiving disposition, and a feeling heart. But there is an excellency in man yet brighter and more honourable than any of these, and that is the power of religion in the soul, a habit of looking up to God in every thing, and through every thing to God: and this quality stands particularly conspicuous in the character of the Patriarch. His whole life had been one continued illustration of the mysterious ways of Providence to man. He had dreamt of pre-eminence, and his dreams had been fulfilled, and yet in a manner so wonderful, as just to reverse the poet's words, and teach us that there is a power above us, and about us, which can make the paths of the very grave to lead to glory. He had dreamt that his whole family, the Sun, the Moon and Stars of Israel's domestic sphere, should bow down in obeisance before him; and we are told that he remembered these dreams, and thus acknowledged God's power and providence, in the very first moment of his brethren's appearance as his suppliants in Egypt. Yet the dream was then but half accomplished, and much more, therefore, would he remember those

“foregone conclusions,” when he found them answered almost to the very letter, by the conviction that his father yet lived indeed, yet loved him indeed, and would yet see, and, of course, bow before his princely glory. He then felt, he then expressed his sense of the wonder-working hand that guides us all unseen. He then acknowledged and he then proclaimed that it was the Lord who had made him a ruler in the land and the lord in Egypt. “God,” said he, “hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and God hath made me a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.” But why had God made him thus? A less humble heart would have attributed it to the recompence of his own righteousness, to his resistance of temptation, or the wisdom of his ways. An understanding less exercised in meditations upon the workings of Providence, would have thought it enough to trace it to his youthful dreams, and say that thus God’s omnipotence had fulfilled what his omniscience had declared. But why had God sent those dreams, and to what purpose had his wisdom so framed his decrees, as to crown Joseph alone with this honour and renown? This was the question which the Patriarch revolved within himself, and we have his answer in the text. “And he said, Be not grieved nor angry with yourselves that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before

you to preserve life. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save you by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither but God." It would be difficult to say whether his kindness or his piety is more eminent in these words. Upon his kindness, however, I will not dwell. It is beside my present purpose, and each man's heart may be left to appreciate the consolation, yet the anguish which such mercy, and such meekness, and such unmerited forgiveness must have brought home to the wounded and repentant sons of Jacob. But with his piety we are more nearly concerned, and remarkable indeed is the spirit of penetration into the divine counsels, and of reliance on the divine promises, and of esteem for divine privileges which his declaration betrays. A common mind would have thought Pharaoh and his house the objects of God's care in the wonderful provision which was made to meet the coming famine, and that Joseph had been raised up to be an especial blessing to the Egyptian. Joseph himself looked deeper into Providence, and saw in the whole the power of the Almighty stretched forth to save his father's race principally, if not alone in the dispensation, and touched and subdued by the sense of the present Deity, he said, "God sent me before you to preserve *you* a posterity in the earth, and to save

you by a great deliverance.” But who were they, the simple shepherds of Canaan, a family at most but “of threescore and fifteen souls” that they should thus fix upon them the eye of Heaven, and call forth so many of its mighty acts? Because the blessing of Abraham was upon them; because the everlasting covenant of God was their’s, and in their loins was the salvation of the world shut up, and in their seed were all the families of the earth to be blessed. Blot out the name of Israel from under Heaven, and man must have gone mourning all the days of his life, without remedy of his wretchedness, and without redemption from the grave; for to the name of Israel alone were the promises of God assured, and in the name of Israel alone had the sons of Adam hope, and Joseph himself was nothing but as he belonged to Israel. To us then nothing is more easy than to see the importance of this race, “though few in number, and they strangers of the land.” Living in a brighter hour, and under a better revelation, we are conscious that all the interests of humanity were bound up in the preservation of *their* posterity, and walking in the mid-day blaze of that life and immortality which has been brought to light through the Gospel, we count the very hairs of their head to have been of more value to the solid welfare of the world, than Pharaoh

king of Egypt, and all his host. But it was far otherwise in the fainter illumination of those early days, when a few scattered rays of prophecy "faint and far-between," were the only light to guide the steps of the believer, and shew to him the finger of Providence as it pointed the way to the great end of all revelation, and all hope. Yet Joseph did see the tendency of God's wonders; and great, indeed, must have been the piety, the humility, and the faith towards God, which could thus teach him, that in the eye of the Almighty himself was nothing, and Egypt was nothing; but that all the mercies which Egypt had felt, and all the greatness, and the glory, and the power of Joseph were but the secret workings of an over-ruling Providence, wrought for the direct and special purpose of saving *Israel* from famine by a great deliverance, and preserving to *Israel* a posterity in the earth. To recommend the imitation of such faith and piety is needless; but it is not needless to say that the example is the example of one young, of one who "remembered his Creator in the days of his youth," of one who had resisted a temptation in his youth, as a wickedness against God, which even in our age we often consider as no wickedness at all; and who from his very childhood had embraced, and held fast the profession of that faith which sages have wanted and philosophers denied. Woe be to

them, for they have gone out of the only way in which no danger is found, and turned from the only fountain in whose waters are life, and immortality, and joy.



LECTURE XX.

 MINOR DIFFICULTIES IN GENESIS.

 RECAPITULATION, AND
 CONCLUSION.

2 PET. III. 16.

“ In which are some things hard to be understood.”

IT is the purpose of the present course of Lectures to consider only the Ethico-historical Difficulties of the book of Genesis,—those difficulties which arise out of such historical incidents as may be deemed improper to be recorded in a divine revelation, or whose nature may appear irreconcilable either with the moral attributes of the Deity, or the general systems of our moral philosophy. Each of the principal difficulties of this kind, which seemed capable of affording matter for a separate Discourse, has already been investigated. We have explained the grounds of that superior respect with which Abel's offering was received; and vindicated the curse of Noah upon Canaan from any accusation of injustice or vindictive wrath. We have justified Abraham in

his obedience to the command to offer up his son ; examined into the respective merits of Jacob and Esau, and elucidated the motives of Joseph's conduct towards his brethren. This, at least, is what we have attempted to perform to the best of our power, and with all the diligence and impartiality we could command. But besides these greater difficulties there are others in Genesis of a similar nature, though of inferior magnitude and importance, which still demand our attention. To these a general answer only is required, a brief answer only can be given. It seems expedient, therefore, before we close the labours of the year, to class these minor difficulties according to their several resemblances, under some distinct heads, and thus bringing together those which have some common characteristics, to examine them not individually, but collectively.

Of these minor difficulties, then, we may observe three different classes in Genesis:—First, the lesser faults of the three great Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Secondly, the more heinous transgressions of their immediate descendants or relatives: and thirdly, the supposed offences of either,—those actions either of the Patriarchs or their posterity against which the accusation of immorality or impropriety has been unjustly directed by the infidel.

Of the lesser faults of the three primary progenitors of the Israelites, we may enumerate the two-fold denial of his wife by Abraham;—a similar denial of Rebekah by Isaac; and some instances in which Jacob does not appear to have spoken and acted with a due regard to the strict requisitions of sincerity and truth. When “Abraham went down into Egypt to sojourn there, he said unto Sarah his wife, Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake^a.” And when they came into Egypt she said as she had been commanded, and was taken into Pharaoh’s, the king of Egypt’s house. Again, when he “sojourned in Gerar, Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah^b.” In both these instances the Patriarch was guilty of equivocation if not of untruth; and in both, his deviation from the rigid laws of correctness was followed by a variety of serious evils to those whom his assertions had deceived. Pharaoh and Abimelech were both “plagued with great plagues, because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife,” although the conduct they had pursued had been occasioned only by the fault of another. In the same manner also did Isaac act towards another Abimelech; and when the men of Gerar asked him of his wife, Isaac said, “She is my sister; for he

^a Gen. xii. 10—20.^b Ibid. xx. 2 to the end.

feared to say, She is my wife, lest the men of the place should kill him for Rebekah ; because she was fair to look upon^a.” Here also we have another departure from sincerity of speech ; and, perhaps, when Jacob^b desired Esau “to pass on before him,” and said that he himself would follow more slowly, “according as the cattle and the children were able to endure, until he came unto Esau unto Seir,” he scarce had any serious intention of fulfilling his promise. Be it so. Be it, that in all these cases there was guile in the lips of the speakers, and what will follow from the admission but this, that these holy men were still men, infirm and erring, and prone to evil, like ourselves. We neither pretend nor wish to deny the existence of their failings. We neither prohibit nor fear the censures which the enemies of revelation can justly level against their characters. Let them exaggerate none of their offences, and let them magnify none of their defects ; let them set down nothing in malice, nor ever wilfully misrepresent their motives or their deeds, and we will freely allow the frailties of every one of the saints of God. For what if they were not perfect in their generation ? At least it must be allowed, that their violations of the holiness of God’s law were neither frequent nor great. They stood pre-eminent in religion and righteousness above the rest of their

^a Gen. xxvi. 6—11.

^b Ibid, xxxiii. 14.

contemporaries, though still sinners indeed, in some respects, together with the rest. In the fervency of their zeal for the pure worship of the only God, in the readiness of their submission to his will, the steadfastness of their faith, and the sincerity of their obedience, we shall be able to find but few in any age by whom they could be equalled, and none by whom they could be excelled: and if some errors and infirmities are still observed in their actions and words, those failings can never, indeed, be justified or excused, but neither can they be justly considered as rendering the individuals in whom they were found unworthy of the best favours of the Almighty. It is comparative, and not positive excellence in man, which must guide the Deity in the choice of his instruments. It is the least sinful, and not the perfectly sinless being, whom he must select for the depositaries of his truth, and the preservation of the knowledge of his will: because if it were otherwise, if nothing but unblemished innocence were to be allowed to recommend us to Heaven, and no one was to be separated from the rest of his fellow-creatures, as the father of the Messiah, and the progenitor of the chosen people, but one who was free from every degree of criminality, then would there have been neither any people chosen, nor any Messiah born. For it is the language of experience, as

well as holy writ, that "all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God," and that temptations have triumphed in their turn over the brightest and best of those examples which the world has been accustomed to set up as the objects of imitation and praise. Let the unbeliever, then, be as severe as he will upon the failings of the "friends of God;" we neither deny the existence of their errors, nor palliate their guilt. We readily lament and acknowledge both; but we maintain that, notwithstanding these manifest imperfections and faults, they were, of all others, the most holy in their respective generations, and possessed of qualifications which, so far as our judgements extend, rendered them, of all others, the fittest for the execution of those purposes they were intended to serve. If there be any who doubt the justness of the conclusion, let them point out that blot in their general characters, which was so foul as to make them unworthy of God's mercy to approve, or that defect from which their absolute unfitness may be proved. But never let us Christians be driven from our belief in the truth of revelation, because we find the corruption of nature and the consequences of the fall exemplified in the failings of the Saints.

We have now seen that if God was to choose any of the sons of Adam from the rest, it must be

some of his sinful sons, because all are sinful ; and hence we have inferred, that however undeniable may be the faults of Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, upon some special occasions, yet as their general holiness was most exemplary, and their piety and sincerity most undoubted, we have no reason to allow their few and comparatively trivial infirmities to disturb our confidence in the propriety of their selection, as the friends of God. But why did Moses record their transgressions at all ? Why, it may be said, did he not leave us to conceive that the Patriarchs were imperfect, like the rest of their fellow-creatures, and not diminish our respect for their excellence, and give an opening for the objections of infidelity by a detailed narration of their misdeeds ? Because the objections of infidelity would not have been obviated by his silence ; and because there were some weighty reasons for the method he has actually pursued. Had the virtues of the Saints been the only part of their character upon which the pen of the sacred historian had dwelt, had he concealed the faults of the progenitors of the Israelites whilst relating the sins of the surrounding nations, the unbeliever would have still more severely condemned him for the partiality of his narrative, than he now does for the impropriety of some of the circumstances he has detailed. In fact, the honesty and fidelity of Moses,

as the biographer of the Patriarchs, demanded from him an account both of the brighter and the darker shades in their character. But beyond and beside this particular inducement, we may observe, that had nothing but good been attributed to these holy men of old, we should have wanted one of our most cogent confirmations of one of the most peculiar and humiliating doctrines of the Bible. The Scripture hath concluded all, without exception, under sin; and it is upon the foundation of man's universal guilt that it builds up the doctrine of salvation by grace and faith. We are told, that in us, that is, in our flesh, dwelleth no good thing; that there is a law in our members warring continually against the law of our minds, and bringing us into bondage to sin and death. The consequence of this struggle it represents to be generally against the dictates of conscience, and so much in favour of our lusts, that without God's grace assisting us, we should never triumph, and without Christ's mercy redeeming us, we should never be saved. We are informed that both Jews and Gentiles, they are all under sin; that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; and that so unequal is the contest, that even the just man falleth seven times a day: and all this weakness and wickedness in the world is traced up to the transgression of our first parents as its source, and referred to

the mystery of the Cross as its only remedy. It is hard to bring down the pride of men's reason to the acknowledgement of such humbling truths, and the self-sufficiency of their virtue to a reliance upon their Saviour alone. We turn to the records of the Mosaic history for proof. We lay our fingers upon the best of beings in each succeeding age; upon Noah; upon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; upon Moses, and Eli, and Samuel; upon Solomon, and upon the man after God's own heart; and in every one we find some signal exemplification of the truth of this alleged corruption of our common nature. Yet with all this body of condemning proof, still the haughtiness of man is not bowed down. He still clings to the powers of what he calls Nature (as if the powers of nature were not the gifts of God), as sufficient to sanctify, and to save. As believers, then, in that fundamental principle of the Scriptures, and the Church, that man is indeed far gone from the original righteousness he enjoyed, we cannot but rejoice that Moses has recorded those frailties of the Patriarchs, which, if what the Gospel teaches concerning the fall be true, we are sure they must have committed; and that by thus recording them he has enabled us to perceive more strongly the great necessity of a Saviour for all, and his great kindness in suffering for all. Indeed, so uni-

formly is the corruption of mankind evidenced in the sacred Volume, that I can at present recollect but one individual Patriarch, of whom much, and at the same time nothing evil, is said. That one is Joseph; and if it were not presumptuous to assign a reason for the peculiarity, we might suppose that he was left unblamed in any thing, in order that he might more exactly typify the unsullied holiness of the undefiled Jesus, to whom, in the great outlines of his life, he bore such a constant and accurate resemblance.

2. Perhaps more than enough has been said to shew that neither did the frailties of the Patriarchs render them unworthy of these divine favours they received, neither was it needless for the sacred historian to record their faults. Let us proceed, in the next place, to examine what is the force of those objections which men have urged against revelation, because of the more heinous transgressions of the descendants and relatives of the friends of God. Now it is clear that "with God there is neither variable-ness nor shadow of turning," and that, consequently, when he has once pronounced an irrevocable blessing as a recompence of the righteousness of any particular individual, not all the vices and the follies of the posterity of that individual can work a change in the esta-

blished purposes of his Almighty mind. But we know that "when God made promise to Abraham" being "willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, he confirmed it by an oath^a." And "because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself," saying, "By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, that in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice^b." Here then "by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie," by his own decree confirmed by his own oath, was the obedience of Abraham rewarded by an irrevocable blessing. We consequently conclude that whatever might be the demerits of his descendants, no sin of their's could make it reasonable to expect that God would recal those promises which he fixed so firmly that they should never afterwards be moved. The only thing, therefore, for which we are really concerned to account, is the introduction of the particulars of their crimes into that sacred Volume whose professed object it is to write for the world's instruction in righteousness.

Upon this point, then, we may first of all observe, that however grievous or impure may have been the acts themselves, they are never

^a Heb. vi. 13. 17, 18

^b Gen. xxii. 16. 18.

related in a manner which is inconsistent with the ends of morality. Scripture language is never such as to excite to any approbation or imitation of the guiltiness it describes. In this it differs from every other work. In this it bears upon it the indubitable seal of the Spirit of sanctity. Of course this assertion is incapable of any other proof than the feelings of those who have studied revelation for themselves. To those feelings, however, we do boldly appeal, and ask, with confidence, whether any one ever rose from the perusal of God's word with a single passion excited, or a single unsanctified thought raised. But in addition to this undefiled air of purity which pervades the inmost recesses of the Bible, we would also remark that many of the most awful scenes of unholiness it relates, form an essential part of its plan, and that their omission would have mutilated its perfection and purpose. The incest of the daughters of Lot, the trespass and death of Onan, and the transgression of Thamar with Judah, have all been shewn, by Allix and by others, to have a bearing upon the promised seed. As Christ, therefore, is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of the law, it was natural and it was useful to introduce every transaction which might prove that the prophecy had all along been believed, and its fulfilment hoped for in every genera-

tion, and sought for by every means. Other crimes again, as the selling of Joseph by his brethren, and the cruelty of the sons of Jacob to the inhabitants of Shechem, form such integral parts of the history of the Israelites, that they could not with propriety have been left untold. Thus may we explain the appearance of at least some of these sinful transactions, and if there be any, the reasons of whose introduction we cannot so clearly point out, we ought surely to be influenced by the elucidation which many have received, to believe that, if we had more light upon those periods of history, every remaining obscurity would be as completely dissipated, and every line of the Mosaic narrative be vindicated from censure. For it never can be unnecessary or improper to relate what is connected with the object we have in view, when that object itself is useful, and our mode of relation not productive of any evil actions or evil thoughts.

3. Those actions of the Patriarchs or their posterity which have been unjustly censured by the Infidel, form the last class of objections we are to examine. So numerous, however, are the false accusations which have been urged, that it would be impossible to consider them all. I shall, therefore, content myself with a

reference to two which are most generally known; the alleged cruelty of Abraham in his conduct to Hagar, and the alleged selfishness of Jacob in his vow to God.

When "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham mocking^a," she demanded that the bond-woman and her son should be cast out. "The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight;" yet at length he consented, and he sent Hagar and her son away; and she departed, and wandered, and had almost died in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. It is for this act that he is condemned as being guilty of cruelty to the mother and her helpless child: and when the circumstances are thus nakedly and defectively stated, the condemnation bears every appearance of being just. But when we add that God had commanded him to let her go in obedience to the wishes of Sarah, and had relieved his mind of all real cause of anxiety by telling him that "of the son of the bond-woman he would also make a nation," the whole complexion of the matter is changed. His conduct, instead of being a mark of his carelessness towards Hagar's and Ishmael's fate, becomes an act of well-grounded reliance upon the word of God, upon God's sure and

^a Gen. xxi. 9—15.

positive promise that he would himself provide for the bond-woman and her son.

A similar investigation into the nature and origin of Jacob's vow^a, will also clear it of every objection by which it has been pressed. Jacob was forced, from fear of Esau, to quit his father's house, and to go "toward Haran;" and God appeared and made great promises to him in a vision of the night. When Jacob, therefore, rose up early in the morning, he "vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: and this stone which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee." This is interpreted as if Jacob had vowed, that he would never acknowledge the Lord for his God, until he had conferred upon him these various benefits. In this case there would indeed be both selfishness and folly in his vow. But a very different conclusion arises when the whole is correctly and fairly viewed. In the vision of that night of which we spoke, God promised to Jacob not only that he "would keep him in all places

^a Gen. xxviii. 20, 21, 22.

whither he went, and bring him again into that land," but also that he would give that land to him and to his seed, and that his seed should be "as the dust of the earth" in multitude, and that in him and them should "all the families of the earth be blessed," and that he "would not leave him until he had done that which he had spoken to him of." These were mighty, and amazing, and unmerited mercies. Jacob felt that they were mighty, felt that they were unmerited; and not presuming to fix his thoughts upon the more wonderful part of the promise, vowed that if God in his goodness would fulfil the least of the mercies of which he had spoken, and give him only his food and raiment, and a return in peace, he would on the very spot in which he had received the promise, raise a place for the worship of the Lord, and give him a tenth of all he might possess, as a pious memorial of his gratitude for benefits undeserved. It was not, then, a vow that he would not worship God, unless some great thing was done for him. It was only a vow that if a very little were done for him, if he had but the preservation and necessities of life granted to him, he would in that particular place build a house holy to the Lord, and bring to him an offering proportioned to his power. If there was evil in this, it is an evil we should do well

to imitate: for, unlike Jacob, we are too often thankful for the common conveniences of life, and grasp at the possession and murmur at the want of those greater blessings we have no claim to enjoy.

The Lectures of the year, and the labours of my office are now brought to a close. That portion of my task, which was accomplished in the former part of the year, was employed in a variety of considerations upon Scripture Difficulties in general, in an explanation of their nature and origin, a vindication of their existence and extent, and a statement of the rules necessary for their interpretation, and the success we might probably expect. The latter portion has been occupied in exemplifying and illustrating the principles before laid down, by an application of them to a succession of particular difficulties in the book of Genesis: and here, for the present, I quit the consideration of "things hard to be understood." Perhaps indeed it is, in some respects, to be lamented, that they should have engaged our undivided attention so long. For when the objections of Infidelity to the contents of the Bible are continually brought before our view, even though it be for the express purpose of refutation, we almost begin to suspect that such objections are more numerous and weighty than the

evidences in its favour. Perhaps too our own ignorance or unskilfulness, as an advocate, may have sometimes left the advantage of argument on the side of the adversary of revelation; and it is certain, that the controversial form, which, in the discussion of such litigated questions, we have so often necessarily assumed, is not the most consistent with the holy purposes of the Sabbath, nor the most suitable to the sacredness of God's house, nor the most favourable to the preservation of that spirit of humble piety which alone can give value to the labours of the divine, or hold his hearers in a teachable and serious frame of mind. But let the inconveniences attending the course we have pursued be what they may, I scarce know how it was possible that, considering the circumstances, they could have been obviated. To intermingle practice with doctrine, and to pass from reasonings on religion to alternate reproof, and correction, and instruction in righteousness, is easy and most right in the regular parochial minister, because he has full time and opportunity for considering each subject in its turn. But thus rightly and wisely to divide the word of truth is almost impracticable for him whose office whilst it demands unity of plan, limits both the choice of subjects, and the period of delivery. Having, therefore, been once led to select the difficulties of Scripture, as the most


expedient topic of investigation in these awful days of blasphemy and rebuke against the internal credibility of the revelation of our God, a necessity was laid upon us of persevering in that choice, and meeting each objection as it occurred, however speculative, or however controversial the discussion might prove. That, to the best of our ability, being done, it now only remains for us to conclude, by solemnly and finally beseeching all to endeavour to obviate the dangers to which the constant recurrence of those controversial discussions which, whether from choice or necessity, so often abound in this place, must unavoidably lead. For of all modes of life, that which we are here accustomed to pass is, perhaps, as little favourable as any to the attainment of deep sentiments of serious piety. Removed from the softening intercourse of domestic life, our feelings are not mellowed into that tenderness which is so congenial to the spirit of Christian love. Withdrawn from the temptations of society and the world, and restrained from the grosser sins, by station, by character, and the many human eyes that are upon us, we are apt to forget the eye that is over all, and to feel less sensibly the necessity of God's preventing grace, and the value of continual prayer for his aid. Living in solitude too, the undisputed lords of our dwelling, and with no inclinations to consult but our own, the

harshness of our tempers is not worn down by collision, nor the selfishness of our dispositions subdued by the habit of yielding to the wishes of another. Lastly, the uniformity and equality of our days, and the competency of which, without a thought, we are sure to partake, makes us at once insensible of the insecurity of earthly things, and unacquainted with the best teachers of heavenly-mindedness,—affliction, disappointment, and grief. To all this we may add, that either the employment of the mind abates the edge of the sorrows into which we fall, and renders religion less essential to our happiness, or else an indolent melancholy shuts up every genial glow of kindness, and unfits us at once for every exertion and sympathy, either for the good of others and our own. All these things are against godliness of soul. Independent and intellectual in every thing that we think or do in our ordinary life, we stand in double need, therefore, of having the holy affections of the heart enlivened and spiritualized by practical preaching. But it is not only of ourselves we should think, nor is it only for ourselves we should fear. There are those around us for whose welfare it is our duty and interest to feel. There are those, over whose inexperience we are to watch, as they that must give an account, and who, standing upon the confines of youth and manhood, with the passions of the one unsub-

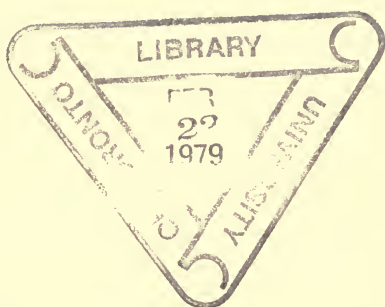
dued, and the principles of the other unconfirmed, are in an hour of life most full of temptation, and most dangerous to religion and to virtue. If these, then, when they come within these sacred walls, are condemned to hear from us only of the objections of Infidelity, or the controversies of divines; if we reason ever upon the rudiments or mysteries of our faith, and appeal but seldom to their consciences, and press but little upon their affections the spirituality of the Gospel, and the serious and heavenly character of the life it requires, what can they conclude, but that religion is the object of the understanding rather than the heart, a thing of thought, rather than of feeling. And if such should ever be the unhappy imagination they imbibe, a chillness will quench their love of God for ever, and the bloom of their religious affections being blighted when it should have been cherished, they will grow cold and careless, and mere philosophic Christians, destitute of all warmth of heavenly-mindedness themselves, and the enemies of all display of heavenly-mindedness in others.

For all these causes then, let us labour to cast aside every weight, and the sin that doth most easily beset us, the sin of a learned luke-warmness to the spirituality of sacred things. Let us endeavour, as much as in us lieth, and as much

as the necessities of the place will permit, ever to be zealous to preach Christ rather than ourselves, to shew forth our growth in grace, rather than our growth in knowledge, and forgetting the rewards and the reputation that are earthly, let us look only to that awful world where, as the strong eloquence of Chillingworth has uttered the thought, if we shine not beautifully, as the stars of God's glory, we shall glare fearfully, as the firebrands of his wrath, for ever. But there is one who can save us from this sin and wrath, and may he, the discerner of spirits, and the ruler of thoughts, give unto all his people, and unto all his ministers, his heavenly grace, and especially unto his ministers and congregation here present, that with meek heart, and due reverence, they may ever both hear and preach his holy word; truly serving him not only by their learning, but their holiness, and not only in reason, but in righteousness, all the days of their life.









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